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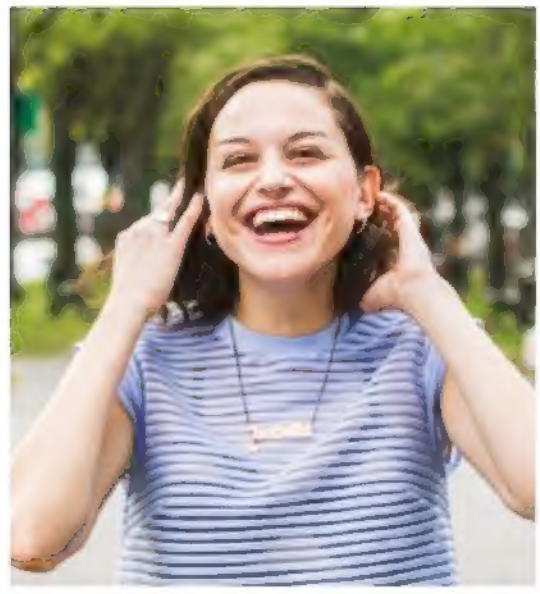


ISABELIA HERRERA

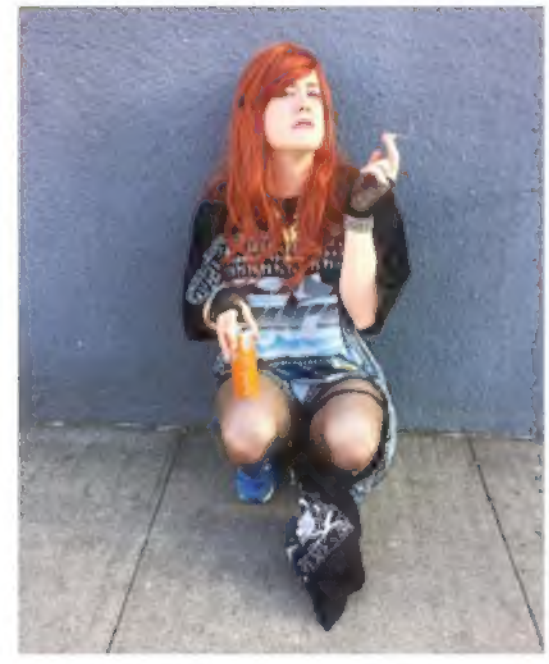
"In a world that socializes women to deny pleasure at every turn, seeking it is a form of self-care," says the Dominican culture writer. For Let's Play, Herrera profiles Emilia Ortiz, a bruja turned mentalhealth advocate who uses social media to share her spiritual gifts. Herrera's insightful pieces for The New York Times, Slate and Remezcla earned her a spot on Forbes's "30 Under 30 in Media" list in 2017. Her writing focuses on music, pop culture and Latinx identity.

VINCE MYO M. AUNG

"I want to tell a story rather than just take a pretty photo," says Aung, who captured the metamorphoses of a young musician for School of Pop Starring King Princess. "That's why I love how we portray King Princess as different characters." The Burmese photographer says he's inspired by works that blur the distinction between time and space — a theme recognizable in his PLAYBOY contribution.

SIMON HANSELMANN

The Tasmanian-born cartoonist, known for his New York Times best-selling series Megg & Mogg, created the six-page comic Megg's Pleasure as an homage to PLAYBOY's classic Little Annie Fanny series. Like the Harvey Kurtzman and Will Elder character, the twosome are humorously hedonistic. "This felt like a natural fit for Megg and Mogg," Hanselmann says. "They're sexual warriors on the societal battlefield."



ARIELA KOZIN

"Kylie Jenner is one of the most famous women on the planet, and everyone thinks they know her because she grew up on TV. But she's incredibly shy and private," says the PLAYBOY features e ditor. For e ntry into Jenner's world, Kozin called in the mogul's beau, rapper Travis Scott (last featured in our Spring 2019 issue), to interview her and act as creative director for her cover story. Kozin also oversaw Bliss Your Heart, High Dining, School of Pop Starring King Princess and Face-to-Face With Toro y Moi.

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Photography by Arthur St. John
No 25 | **January 2020**

"He's an ass man."

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WHAT HAPPENS WHEN A WITCH GETS WI-FI? MEET THE WOMAN WHO USES SACRED SPIRITUALITY TO ENCHANT OUR DAILY LIVES (AND MAYBE EVEN SAVE OUR MENTAL HEALTH)

EMILIA ORTIZ

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **BRAD OGBONNA**

BY **ISABELIA HERRERA**

The *bruja* - Spanish for "witch" — sitting across from me proudly sports a BROOKLYN chest tattoo in sprawling Gothic letters. I first notice it peeking out from under her baby-pink tube top, announcing her roots with the same defiance as her sharp Nuyorican accent when she greets me at the East Williamsburg vegan diner Champs — a favorite of hers, primarily for its seitan asada. "How y'all tricked my Puerto Rican ass?" she says jokingly about the fake meat before settling on a more indulgent (though still vegan) meal: macaroni and cheese, a side of fries and a banana milkshake.

Emilia Ortiz's playful irreverence has no doubt burnished her internet fame, but that fame can mostly be attributed to what she promulgates. She's part *bruja*, part healer and part mental-health advocate, and she draws on an eclectic collection of spiritual practices, including candle work, reiki and meditation, to help people live better lives. In minute-long Instagram videos — she practices both privately and publicly —Ortiz doles out affirmations and guidance to some 227,000 followers. She's often sitting in front of her vast collection of houseplants. They're named, of course: Chachi, Rosa, Conejo Malo, etc.

Instead of the hushed tones you might expect from a counselor, Ortiz punctuates her videos with expletives: "In case you ain't already know, I'ma tell your ass: You are a magnificent-ass being. Your guts are made of motherfucking stardust, okay?… I've been checking up on your ass in the collective consciousness, and let me tell you: *You're beautiful*."

This tough talk distinguishes her from her peers — a growing cavalcade of women who are reclaiming previously denounced forms of spirituality. In pop culture, online and in real life, there has been a resurgence of sorcery. Consider the recent flood of witch-inspired television shows, such as *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina, American Horror Story*, the *Charmed* reboot and *Game of Thrones*. As of 2014, approximately 700,000 American adults identified as Wiccan or pagan, compared with just 8,000 Wiccans in 1990. Although organized religion is losing favor among younger people — about 35 percent of millennials don't identify with any religion, according to a 2014 Pew Research Center survey — the cultural demand for spirituality, self-help and wellness is booming.

In Latinx communities in particular, a renewed focus on *brujería* signals a long overdue resurrection of sorts — a revival of the once-condemned mysticism entwined in our heritage. Throughout the colonial era, the Catholic Church persecuted brujas, branding them evil enchantresses. Today *brujas* can practice openly, which means a new generation is exploring *brujería* in the same place they explore everything else: the internet.

Ortiz is among the most beloved practitioners working today, and she has always been surrounded by magic. The bodegas in the New York Afro- Caribbean neighborhood where she grew up sold *agua de florida*, a sacred ritual water used for protection spells and cleansings. The local botanica, a sort of apothecary dedicated to folk religion and alternative medicine, stocked every candle, amulet and statuette she would ever need. These totems were part and parcel of her diasporic upbringing.

Her spiritual gifts manifested through her dreams as a young girl. She would astral project, an experience closely related to lucid dreaming. "I would feel everything in my dreams, have control of my dreams and not be able to figure out if I was dreaming or if I was awake," she says. "As a kid, that's fucking scary, so my father would talk to my grandmother about it, and she'd help me figure it out."

It was her *abuela* who first exposed Ortiz to *brujería*. As in many Caribbean families, Ortiz's grandmother cultivated her practice from a wellspring of traditions passed down by ancestors. Some folks are formally initiated into a particular religion, such as Santeria, but many of the skills Ortiz's abuela imparted — such as dream interpretation and candle work — are embedded in the cultural memory of Puerto Ricans and other Caribbean communities. Her grandmother's approach was a dexterous bricolage of rites that included everything from *limpias* (cleansings) to numerology.

"Whatever kind of *limpia* you needed, she got you. Whatever kind of *vela* [candle] you needed, she got you," Ortiz says. She recalls a childhood incident when her grandmother dispelled bad spirits from a home her parents had just moved into. "Somebody kept cursing juju on the apartment," she says. Her grandmother doused the place in *agua de florida* and lit a candle (in a bucket so the family cat wouldn't tip it over and set the apartment on fire). According to her mother, Ortiz says, "the house smelled like Florida water for a whole fucking week."

Other lessons included healing techniques, spiritual bathing and menstruation rituals. As Ortiz matured and confronted anxiety and depression in high school, she came to rely on such rituals for strength. That's when she realized she could help others.

Today, Ortiz marries her personal experiences with digital advocacy, offering one-on-one spiritual guidance over the phone and using Instagram to raise awareness and reduce the stigma around mental health, especially in low-income communities of color. Multiple studies have suggested that

Y'ALL ARE OUT HERE MAKING THIS A TOURIST DESTINATION."

depression among Americans of all ages is on the rise, but diagnoses among young people are increasing the fastest, by as much as 47 percent from 2013 to 2016 among 18- to 34-year-olds, according to a 2018 Blue Cross Blue Shield report.

As witchcraft's influence on the zeitgeist grows, Ortiz's philosophy of merging the contemporary and the ancestral sets her apart, but it also invites criticism. "While things are evolving, tradition is something that should be kept in mind," she says. "I'm not a strict traditionalist, because not everybody should be one, but we should be honoring the ancestors in our modern world and continuously re-educate ourselves on the traditional ways."

Witchcraft's infiltration of popular culture has sparked a thorny debate around authenticity, exploitation and cultural ownership. With sacred spirituality proliferating on digital spaces, more people are seeking out these alternative forms of healing. This includes outsiders alongside descendants of people who depended on such practices for basic survival. The ayahuasca boom is one example of the rapidly spreading interest in Latin American folkloric healing practices: Stroll the streets of Williamsburg and you'll find multiple healing centers offering $500 ayahuasca ceremonies guided by amateur practitioners who claim to have studied with Quechua and Shipibo shamans in the Amazon rain forest.

Ortiz's Caribbean roots mean she doesn't specifically work with the hallucinogenic brew, but as a bruja she remains concerned about unqualified outsiders profiting off ancient practices. "There are so many people trying to preserve this for their culture, and y'all are out here making this a tourist destination," she says. "Everybody needs to go find their something and figure it out. If we work toward that, where people have reclaimed and are actually practicing their own shit, there will be a point where it's okay to share knowledge."

To some Latinx folks, claiming the *bruja* identity is a means of normalizing once-maligned traditions. For others, it's a form of virtue signaling and clout chasing: a careless erasure of the discipline and years of training required to become a spiritual healer. After all, Ortiz's public practice lives on a platform known for meme-ifying the human experience and cataloging it for mass validation, not selfpreservation. In Puerto Rico in particular, ancestral spiritual practices were attacked throughout the colonial period. As late as 1879, the Spanish crown targeted *espiritismo* by mandating municipal permission for *veladas*, or nighttime séances. Now you can conduct your séance on Instagram Live.

Given the tangled history of oppression, Ortiz views her practice as a way of memorializing our forebears. "We're honoring ancestors by doing this in the present day, and especially by being open with it. We're honoring them in a way that's like, 'This is how you should have been able to practice, and I honor you by doing it in this way.' "

At the same time, she acknowledges the pitfalls of performing certain rituals without proper training — not only out of respect for tradition but in recognition of the potential danger to the self. "Witchcraft and *brujería* are for everybody, but you need to be mindful of what you're practicing," she says. "I would not advise anybody to go out and start performing." She warns me about the dangers of botched ceremonies and individuals who perform divination sessions without the mentorship of an elder.

"If you're just trying to see if it's for you, then get some books, go to a botanica and ask about it a bit. But don't just decide, 'All right, I'm gonna go cop a Yemaya statue because I like how she looks.' If you get into this shit the wrong way, you can end up opening yourself up to things you don't want to touch, and you won't have anybody to help you remove it or protect you."

Ortiz admits to being wary of the gatekeeper role, particularly since the meaning of these practices has shifted over time, creating new belief patterns. What is the meaning of modern brujería, I wonder.

"I'm not an elder yet, and our elders are probably who should be answering such questions," she says. "They did this through the times when they were persecuted."

Clearly, Ortiz doesn't want to position herself as an authority, especially when so much of her advocacy is based on her own experiences. "As I continue to get older, I'm becoming more private with my personal practice," she says, adding that she hopes to open a family practice focused on accessibility. She doesn't see herself following a traditional trajectory into priestesshood until she has children — who, she predicts, will have gifts just as she does. "I'll probably be losing my mind over my children's intuition and their guides telling me things about myself that I don't want to hear," she says with a laugh

Before we part ways, Ortiz offers this: "I want people to feel like it's doable. Magic, in this day and age, is not the unknown. It's making the unknown part of the everyday." ■

HOW LEARNING TO COMMUNICATE EFFECTIVELY COULD SAVE YOUR RELATIONSHIP

There are three things that I truly believe we should get taught in school: how to do our own taxes, what really happens during sex, and how to effectively and constructively communicate. This last skill would be incredibly useful in not only romantic relationships but in work and family relationships and friendships as well. Unfortunately, we don't leave high school and enter our adulthood with effective techniques and skills that assist us in knowing how to have constructive conversations, and I spend much of my time working with couples and helping them to learn these skills and techniques. Let's break down the basics of good communication, as well as looking at some specific techniques you can use.

REMEMBER, TALKING IS HOW WE ENGAGE. IT'S A VITAL (AND POWERFUL) TOOL THAT SHOULDN'T BE TAKEN FOR GRANTED

1. Ensure you're always engaging in active listening – Active listening is pretty easy to do. It means to listen to our partner without thinking about anything else but what they are saying at that moment by being present and fully engaged.

- Maintain eye contact (well, as much as possible), as this helps your partner to really feel that you're listening and you're present. When you're staring off into the TV or your phone, or perhaps even gazing at the floor, your partner will feel less important and may even perhaps feel that you don't care.
- We act like we are listening, but we are doing "whatever listening" – when we are distracted instead of paying attention to what our partner is saying it's as if we don't care; "I'm right…" listening – when we already know we're right and have the answer, and so we stop listening before a person has finished speaking; or "what next…" listening – where we are thinking ahead, or of something completely different while a person is talking to us.

2. Always use 'I' language – one of the most important communication skills is to learn the use of 'I' messages. This is because when you start a sentence with 'you', your partner might feel attacked, blamed or criticized and thus they'll feel the need to defend themselves. Begin to use the words "I feel…" when talking to your partner. For example, "I feel unimportant when you're late for dinner and don't call" is much more effective than, "you don't care about anyone but yourself, or you wouldn't keep me waiting." The 'you' statement is a blaming statement, and will often start or escalate an argument. An 'I' statement reports feelings and it's easier for your partner to respond in a positive way as they don't feel like they are being blamed. Feeling words are emotions, and include words such as: hurt, angry, frustrated, lonely, inadequate, upset, disappointed, forgotten, appreciated, happy, loved, etc.

3. Choose the right time and place – if you want to talk to your partner about something that has been bugging you, it's really helpful to choose a time and a place that is suitable, and where you'll be uninterrupted. Generally, and if you can, try to have difficult conversations in person. Never try to resolve an issue late at night, when you've been drinking, or when your emotions (maybe anger, rage, anxiety) are so high that you cannot think straight. It's okay to go to bed after an argument! Rather agree to resolve it in the morning after you've both tried to get some sleep. Try not to have conflictual conversations in front of friends and family either. It's not fair to them to be stuck around a fighting couple. Again, agree to press pause and pick up the conversation when the timing is more appropriate.

4. Bringing up the past never helped anybody – no matter how many times your partner did something before, or what has happened that has caused the conflict, try your best to stick with the present moment, how you feel right then and there, and why you're feeling it. People become defensive when they're constantly blamed, so bringing up something that has been an issue again and again, in the same way, is likely going to have the same result it has had in the past.

5. Be curious… always! – it doesn't help anyone to accuse their partner of doing something without trying to understand their partner's point of view. A really great statement to use when sharing with your partner what's on your mind is this: "The story that I'm telling myself is that…" and then asking your partner if you've got it wrong? Owning the way you have conceptualized a situation is important – very few partners take ownership of their disagreements. By being curious and always asking your partner what was happening for them rather than accusing them, or asking them what they need or could be done differently between you can be the difference between constructive or destructive communication.

ANNA NICOLE WEST

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California girl, Anna Nicole West, has lived so many chapters to her life. From corporate girl to gym owner, now she's try ing her hand at adult films, and she's creating quite the buzz a must see b out star for 2020!

Tell us something surprising about you.
I grew up on a ranch, and yes- I can ride a horse!

Were you excited to shoot for Playboy?
YES! It was surreal. A family friend passed away and left me every issue of Playboy that came out in the US for the last 20 years. I have been a huge fan of the Playboy brand for many years!

What inspires you?
I believe we learn the most from our failures and life lessons, and so I'm inspired by the future I want to create for myself.

Why did you choose to pursue a career in modeling?
Modeling can be such a positive outlet. It gives me a reason to always stay on point and focused on health and fitness goals. Plus, it's a great way to see the world and meet new friends!

Who do you look up to in the modeling industry?
Jessica Weaver. I love her! Obviously she is very beautiful, and she is such a positive role model and a very humble and kind person.

What are some of your hobbies?
I love being outdoors and staying active. I live in California (the scenery and weather are amazing); so hiking, skiing, and going to the beach are my favorite things to do.

Name three things on your bucket list.
Well, shooting for Playboy was definitely one! Shooting adult films was also! Hehe, so I have only one thing left: I want to travel the world with a special someone!

Turn-ons.
Good communication; intelligence; generosity; assertiveness.

Turn-offs.
Cheapness; rude to people in the service industry (especially bad tippers); bad hygiene; close mindedness.

Describe your perfect date.
A perfect date for me starts with having a great connection, because with that, we could do almost anything, and just being together would make it enjoyable. However, I do love adventures! Take me somewhere I've never been. I love champagne, a great meal, great sex, and if you smoke cannabis, we might be a match!

Which world capital would you most like to visit and why?
Bangkok! I want to explore Thailand, and Bangkok is a must-see because of the stories I have heard from friends who have visited!

What is your mantra?
Expect nothing and appreciate everything!

SCHOOL of POP
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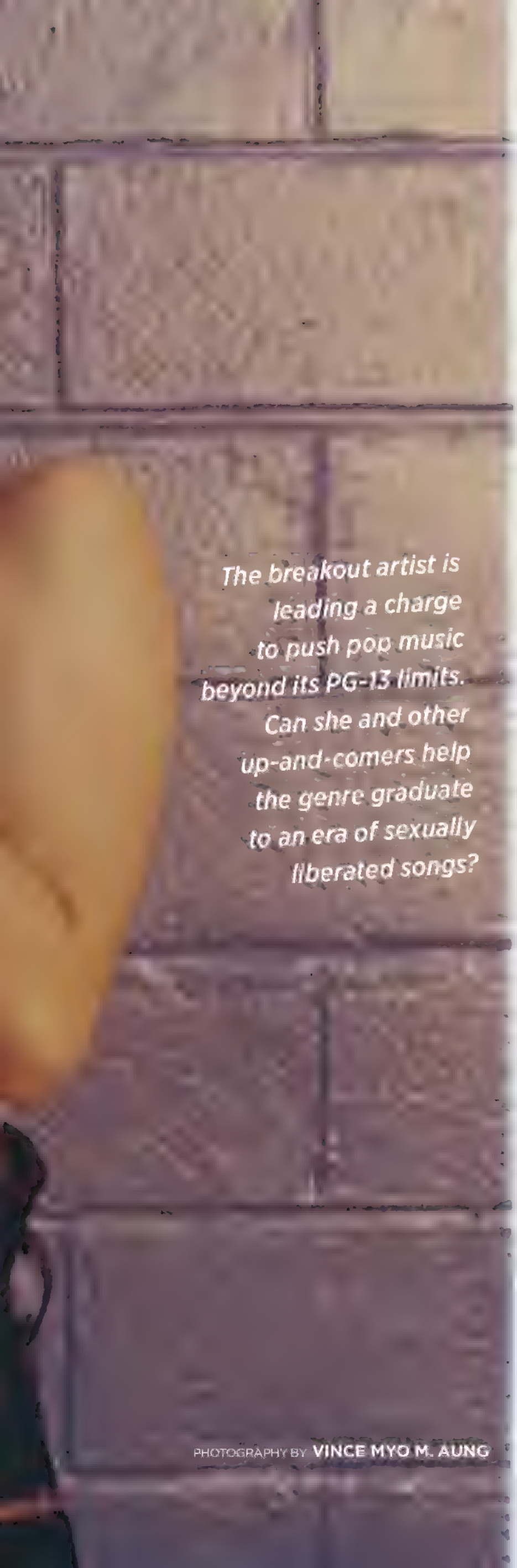
The breakout artist is leading a charge to push pop music beyond its PG-13 limits. Can she and other up-and-comers help the genre graduate to an era of sexually liberated songs?

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **VINCE MYO M. AUNG**

BY **DOUGLAS GREENWOOD**

"I just thought some pussy was bomb, and I wanted to write about it," King Princess tells me, seemingly shrugging off the power and defiance of "Pussy Is God," her breakout single that was universally hailed upon its late-2018 release. Vice called it "the sexy lesbian love song we've been waiting for"; Pitchfork praised it as "tex tbook pop, a catchy ode to a lover"; and Spin deemed it "a fully-formed pop song… brash and funny, delivered with a confidence and swagger."

"After we wrote it" — we refers to King Princess, born Mikaela Straus, and frequent coproducer and engineer Mike Malchicoff — "we realized that it was going to be jarring for some people." She's right: The sexual charge of "Pussy Is God" is blatant, loud and unashamed. Unlike chart-topping bops cloaked in corny double entendres (think Britney Spears's "If U Seek Amy" or Hailee Steinfeld's "Love Myself"), "Pussy Is God" has no hidden meaning. King Princess's songwriting is so literal, in fact, that listening to her music reminds one that sex, despite the cultural climate, should be uninhibited and fun: "Your pussy is God and I love it / Gonna kiss me real hard, make me want it."

Pop music has always worshipped at the altar of sex. Elvis Presley put conservative 1950s America in an orgasmic haze with his pelvic thrust. Madonna drew ire for singing about being "touched for t he very first time" in a wedding dress. The Spice Girls achieved their iconic status when the group of five women suggested they "really, really, really wanna zig-a-zig ah," and Rihanna demanded that a lover "give it to me strong" on her 10th number one U.S. single.

But pop has rarely been overtly proud of sexuality, nor has it embraced its less romantic carnal realities. Burdened by Federal Communications Commission regulations, the genre has remained, since the reign of Madonna in the 1980s, statically cheeky, demure and — as displayed by performers from Dua Lipa to Taylor Swift — fascinated by independence, innocence and romance versus, well, pussy.

In the midst of pop culture's current fixation on rebelling against the patriarchy, King Princess is using the age-old truth that sex sells to deliver her own narrative — one

that is notably uncensored. Much of this creative freedom can be attributed to how streaming has shifted the industry. Despite her radio-unfriendly music, King Princess, who identifies as a gender queer lesbian, has been able to win fans (and press attention) in the Wild West of Spotify and its competitors. "Pussy Is God," with its suggestion that cunnilingus is a form of prayer, glorifies sexual organs while mocking the oppressive nature of organized religion. Going down on a woman is like "praying for hours."

"[Pussy] holds powers that can't be understood," she says.

Her dissent is redolent of that of many other young artists, and even of Madonna, the Queen of Pop herself, but it would be foolish to ignore how King Princess's queerness has informed her perspectives on sex, eroticism and artistry. Though she was born to free-spirited parents (her father owns New York studio Mission Sound Recording; her mother had a career in fashion and worked as a civil rights activist), "the best sex education I got was through the media," she tells me. "My teachers talked about queerness and about shit that wouldn't have been talked about just a couple of years earlier, so I feel very lucky," she says of her relatively progressive high school. "That said, I didn't learn shit about my sexuality through those institutions. I wasn't exposed to queer content through the school system. It was more for straight people. The biggest issue was students getting pregnant."

King Princess is using the age-old truth that sex sells to deliver her own narrative — one that is notably uncensored.

At 20 years old, King Princess belongs to Generation Z — a demographic that, according to a 40-year study published in 2017 by the journal *Child Development*, is less interested in sex than earlier cohorts. Whether that's true or not, Planned Parenthood reports that 96 percent of parents in the United States believe their children should be taught about sex in high school. But state-sanctioned sex education — those hard-edged talks about erections, protection and puberty — remains conservative and noncomprehensive. According to the Gutt macher Institute, only 24 states and the District of Columbia mandate sex education in public schools; out of those 24 states, just nine require inclusive discussions of sexual orientation. Yet, in a survey from the University of New Hampshire, more than 70 percent of students said they had watched online porn by the time they were 18. Such statistics

seem to support the position that today's youth are not receiving a proper education about sexual intercourse, let alone sexual pleasure.

Meanwhile, as music becomes more accessible, listenership is becoming harder to regulate. A 2018 study in the U.S. and the U.K. by research start up Streetbees found that 63 percent of Generation Z listens to music on Spotify, a nd 67 percent listens to music on free YouTube. Relatedly, a study conducted by Larry Miller, director of New York University's Steinhardt Music Business Program, reported that terrestrial-radio listening among teenagers decreased by 50 percent between 2005 and 2016, meaning a songwriter's reach is no longer beholden to the FCC, the org anization that has long determined whether lyrics are too explicit for airplay and thus mass dissemination.

Emphasizing pop music's new sexual awakening are those mainstream female artists who are leveraging the cultural rise in sex positivity. Think Janelle Monáe (admittedly a crossover artist), who performed her viral hit song "Pynk" as part of a medley at the 2019 Grammys with back up dancers dressed in pants resembling labia. Another is Ariana Grande, who has made the *Billboard* top 10 by singing about how a sexual encounter left her "walking side to side" and that a man "can hit it in the mornin' / Yeah, yeah, like it's yours."

Thanks to streaming, the kids of Generation Z don't need a parent's permission to discover any artist, let alone the subversive ones. The postmillennial generations may be the first to enjoy that freedom. Millennials, after all, sometimes needed an adult 18 years or older to purchase an album the Recording Industry Association of America had slapped with a "parental advisory." Before that, MTV practiced its dominance over what people listened to by banishing steamy videos to late night – or off the network altogether.

Couple a broken sex-education system with the internet's vast reserves of sexual material, and young people are left with few role models who responsibly preach the benef its of sex positivity, consent and self-pleasure without sacrificing their artistry or sexual identity. This is why the rise of sexually expressive pop artists is worth paying attention to. King Princess's songs feel intimate and educational, and some are even uncomfortable. But they also feel organic versus contrived or salacious for the sake of controversy. Her sexually charged 2018 debut track, "1950," is another lustrous ode to queer love, inspired by author Patricia Highsmith's *The Price of Salt*, the novel adapted into the acclaimed 2015 lesbian film *Carol*. "I hate it when dudes try to chase me," coos King Princess in a coiling metaphor for the way both queer and unrequited love carry the same suppressed and confusing codes. "I love it when we play 1950."

An impromptu tweet of her lyrics by Harry Styles introduced King Princess to a massive online audience in March 2018. Grammy-winning superpro ducer Mark Ronson took notice and later signed her to his label, Zelig Records, at which point she became a queer superhero. In addition to appearing on Ronson's latest album, *Late Night Feelings*, she has also collaborated with Fion a Apple.

Her success forces the question: What responsibility do musicians have regarding their unprecedented access to younger listeners? And how does that power contend with pop culture's historical preference for censoring sexuality through euphemism? Is it detrimental for the sexually inexperienced to listen to, say, Tove Lo sing about lady wood

CLASS OF 1950

("Dirty on the inside, damaged goods with nothing but pride / Yeah, you give me wood / Give me lady wood") while being taught that abstinence is the best form of protection?

"To learn through the lyrics of a song, the media or the internet helps young people discover the culture they came from," says Amelia Abraham, author of *Queer Intentions: A (Personal) Journey Through LGBTQ+Culture*. "If you're not taught by your parents or in sex education in school about your culture and history, then where are you going to learn about it?"

King Princess isn't the only female pop artist tearing up taboos and inspiring an age of sexual discovery within pop. The meteoric rise of Lizzo, and her cross-genre appeal, is tied to her professions of self-love and sexual pride. And the 23-year-old bisexual singer-songwriter Slayyyter, born Catherine Slater, has gained a sizable fan base by releasing hypersexual music online. "Boy, can you eat me right?" she asks over scuzzy electronic beats in "Candy," released in September 2018. Her spin on Mariah Carey's holiday classic "All I Want for Christmas" is no less matter-of-fact: "All I want for Christmas is to get fucked / Take a big hit, get my tits sucked," the chorus repeats.

A former sex worker, Slayyyter makes music in her bedroom. Earlier this year, she went viral after teasing 14 seconds of her song "Mine" on Twitter. "I didn't know your name, boy / I fell in love / First kiss, your lips drove me insane, boy," she sings, adding living proof that sexually liberated artists can rise from obscurity without simultaneously commercializing and diminishing sex for radio spins.

"I have always been a very sex-positive person, but as a former sex worker, it's something that comes naturally to me," Slayyyter tells PLAYBOY. While her approach to sex is imperative to her success, Slay yyter wants people to know her sexuality isn't a shtick. An independent artist, she remains in charge of her body and her sound. "I recently saw someone on Twitter say my brand is 'Being a Whore,' " she says. "It ticked me off, because I don't think of it as that. It's just who I am."

No surprise, a lesson on owning one's sexual identity is not included among the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's "19 Critical Sexual Education Topics," an online learning aid meant to inform sex-education curricula. Intimacy and pleasure are similarly ignored. Considering that humans have been fornicating for pleasure's sake for eternity — and that sex has consumed adolescence for just as long — it's strange to think we're still reckoning with improper education and debates about sexuality. The breakthrough pop stars of 2018 and 2019 seem to be recognizing an opportunity, and their success isn't dependent on an industr y that for decades has manufactured and rewarded hypersexualized but hollow pop stars and catalogs of euphemistic songs. Pop stars can now be sexy, sex positive and sexually explicit. But this isn't just about pussy. It's a generational awakening. ■

CASSIDY

Model **@CASSIDAYY**

Photography by **JESTON BRANDON @PERFECTLYFLAWLESSPHOTO**
MUA **@NICHELLEMUA**

Tell us something surprising about you?
Something that people are shocked by is that my middle name is the name of a country. Can you guess? Probably not, my middle name is Ireland. Also, I'm a big fan of Law of Attraction and I've met Bob Proctor and David Mills.

Were you excited to shoot for Playboy?
Yes, it's always been a dream of mine and it was so awesome to make it a reality.

What inspires you?
Diversity inspired me. Growing up in Los Angeles Ca, has exposed me to so many different cultures and lifestyles. I'm grateful everyday for being able to live in a city filled with so much energy.

Why did you choose to pursue a career in modelling?
It's an interesting, rewarding, and dynamic career that always appealed to me. I've always had a passion for fashion and photography.

Who do you look up to in the modelling industry?
I think Emily Ratajkowski. She is a huge inspiration to me because she transformed her modeling talents into a very successful clothing line. It inspires me to see female entrepreneurs within the modeling industry.

What are some of your hobbies?
Some of my hobbies include traveling, concerts and hiking. I love spending time with family and friends, and if it includes any of these activities even better!

Name three things on your bucket list?
Scuba diving, travel to Australia and land a cover of Playboy mag.

Turn-ons.
A true gentleman, show me that chivalry is not dead. Nothing turns me on more than a passionate man. Neck kisses and cuddles are very welcome. Smelling incredible doesn't hurt too!

Turn-offs.
Poor hygiene, especially smelly breath. Humor is a must, if you can't bring a smile to my face, we probably won't get along.

Describe to us your perfect date.
I think the perfect date is when our personalities effortlessly click. Nothing more romantic than sushi and a sunset.

Which world capital would you most like to visit, and why?
I'd love to visit Berlin and stand at the point where the wall came down. Knowing so much about its history and what happened during that time, makes me feel grateful for how much that country has progressed.

What is your mantra?
"Passion is energy. Feel the power that comes from focusing on what excites you."

THE PLAYBOY SYMPOSIUM

Pleasure, despite its infinite sources, is pleasure only once it passes through our senses. We asked five heavyweights, from an A-list director to an orgasm curator, to pick a sense and run with it; the following essays might just change the way you see, hear, smell, taste and touch the world

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **MAURIZIO DI IORIO**

Chlorine and Brunettes

BY **COLMAN ANDREWS**

The eight-time James Beard Award winner and co-founder of Saveur magazine muses on the gateway to memory

It is the oldest of the senses and arguably the most useful. Even the single-cell organisms that preceded us by eons possessed a form of smell and used it to appraise their environment. More immediately and vividly even than vision — which has become the predominant human sense — smell can alert us to danger, invigorate or calm us, seduce us sexually or stimulate our appetites.

Smell is also the most treacherous of the senses. It can sneak up on us and stick a dagger in our hearts. A few stray molecules of perfume drifting through the air — invisible, unexpected — can turn our lives upside down in an instant. Suddenly, heartbreakingly, it's as if you're there with her again, drawn by her scent into an aching reminiscence of everything attached to it. Her voice, her eyes, her skin.

Smell affects us this way because it's more intimately and strongly linked to memory and emotion than the other senses, and because scent memory persists long after its visual and auditory counterparts have begun to fade. Vision, hearing, touch and taste get to us indirectly. They transmit information to the cerebral cortex, the part of the brain that gives meaning to our sensory input, by way of the thalamus, a kind of relay station that passes stimuli along to the appropriate corner of the cranium.

The nose, on the other hand, is hardwired—hot-wired straight into the forebrain. Odors are picked up by receptor cells in the nostrils and from there speed without detour to an organ called the olfactory bulb. This connects directly to the limbic system, which regulates much of what we remember and how we feel. New research suggests that the bulb itself might even store memories, making the connection even faster and more intimate. No wonder a waft of perfume can teleport us so instantly and tauntingly.

I'm not sure how old I was when I first started paying attention to the way things smell. As a kid, I took my senses for granted, as most of us probably do. They were just there. In the case of smell, I figured out early on that some aromas pleased me (burgers on the grill, fresh-mown grass, wood smoke), others didn't (sweaty gym socks, garlic breath, rotten eggs), and I thought no more about it.

Gradually, as I accumulated life experience, I started noticing the scent of things more consciously and associating aromas with memories. One night early in my romantic career I had a kind of olfactory epiphany, realizing how capricious scent memory could be. I had gone to bed with a tall, soft brunette at her West Hollywood apartment, where I found the intense odor of chlorine bleach on her just-washed sheets almost too distracting. I was suddenly back in the swimming pools of my childhood, splashing in the sun, far too young for romance. (When the sense of touch took over, that memory happily receded and my olfactory system stored better memories instead.)

I think my olfactory life began to bloom in earnest when I was in my mid-20s and starting to learn about wine. Wine tasting, I quickly figured out, is mostly wine smelling. Literal tasting is important to detect things like acidity, tannins and viscosity, but everything else comes through the olfactory bulb, even (or especially) the wine's actual flavor. What wine lovers call "nose," or the way wine smells in the glass, depends on thousands of sense references, most of which we don't even know we have. Scientists believe the human nose is capable of detecting at least 1 trillion different odors.

These are what make malbec taste different from pinot noir and German riesling different from its California counterpart, and a lot of what disposes us to like good wine better than bad.

Describing the aromas of wine is difficult, however, and wine writers tend to get a little wacky in their attempts. Wines, if you believe the critics, smell like black cherry, red cherry, dried cherry, lemon peel, gingerbread, smoke, tobacco, creosote, coffee, leather, spring flowers, autumn leaves, damp stone, cat pee, manure. Some of these descriptors are nonsensical. I recently saw "salted nuts" evoked to describe the nose of a chardonnay; sorry, but you can't smell salt.

Others make perfect sense. Wine aged in new oak barrels, for instance, often smells like vanilla because both vanilla and oak contain a phenolic aldehyde called vanillin. There's a hint of geraniums in muscat because both the muscat grape and geranium leaves contain an aromatic compound called geraniol.

I tend to cut wine writers some slack, in any case, because an interesting thing about smell is that it doesn't have much of a vocabulary of its own. We have unequivocal ways of describing what we see (blue, square, hazy), hear (soft, discordant, high pitched), feel (firm, hot, bumpy) and taste (salty, sour, sweet). Most of our descriptors for aroma, though, are metaphorical: That smells skunky, grassy, fresh; like apples, pine needles, gasoline.

We each develop our own associations, of course. Skunky to me might be buttery to you. Where I find apples, you might find pears. The perfume that reminds me of a lost love could summon a crazy aunt or nasty boss in your mind. The garlicky aromas drifting out the back door of the Thai restaurant down the street might make you queasy while they just make me want to dig into a bowl of khao soi. And the pungent smell of chlorine bleach, quite reasonably, makes many people gag. But it sometimes still reminds me of swimming pools, and brunettes. ■

Bring On the Vomit

BY **PAUL FEIG**

The lauded comedic director (Bridesmaids, Ghostbusters, the upcoming Last Christmas) on the joys of making you laugh without depending on dialogue

When I was in film school back in the 1980s, the goal was to tell a story visually. That's why the old silent films are so interesting — even though some have dialogue cards, the best don't have very many. Movies started as an exclusively visual medium. With the advent of sound, you were able to explain more things through dialogue, and people got used to witty banter and clever exchanges. Sometimes, we as writers fall back on that as a crutch. For me, the great challenge is to tell something visually.

Part of the emphasis on verbal storytelling comes from the process of script writing. The joke is that when studio executives read a script, they read just the dialogue — they skip over all the action and description. I don't know if that's true, but there are times when you feel that way. You'll write something out visually — the way something happens to a character, or what they're observing and how they're processing it — and then you'll get notes that the audience isn't going to understand *this* and *this*. Generally, when you're addressing notes, you're writing dialogue to explain everything.

As filmmakers, we write all this exposition to shore something up, but the minute two actors get together, so much is spoken visually, through their facial expressions, the positioning of their bodies, the way they're interacting spatially with each other. You assume you have to explain this and this, but then two charismatic actors appear on-screen and the minute they see each other, the audience goes, "They're gonna fall in love."

For the sex scene between Kristen Wiig and Jon Hamm that begins *Bridesmaids*, we choreographed it like a dance and a fight at the same time. That's what made us laugh: Let's start this movie by just blasting it out of the gate with a woman who's in a really bad relationship. You watch it and immediately think, My God, this poor thing. (Of course, if you watch my more recent film, A *Simple Favor*, you'll realize I do the exact same thing every time I shoot a sex scene: It always starts in a wide shot, and as they hit the bed, I slowly push in and land on somebody's face. And that's about it.)

When Melissa McCarthy does her first kill in Spy, she gets in a fight with this guy who falls off a ledge and has a horrible death. She sees it and throws up on him, then drops the knife on him. That's a very big visual, physical gag; as an audience member, you instantly go, "If I killed somebody, I would probably throw up." It's about finding what is visually attached to the story you're telling.

I shot my new movie, *Last Christmas*, entirely in central London. Even though it's a fairly verbal story of two people falling in love, it's important that the visuals augment it to make you feel like you're there. So that's another level of visuals: providing a beautiful backdrop for the verbal.

It can be the hardest thing in the world for a director to figure out which movie to do next. But making films with female leads is all I've ever wanted to do. I really relate to women, and female characters have been portrayed so poorly on the screen for so long. I know so many funny, talented women, and a lot of female audience members weren't seeing themselves in certain roles because of the language of movies and Hollywood's patriarchal view of the world. The men were the heroes, and the women were the ones at home. And that's not aspirational at all. Who watches that and goes, "Cool, I can't wait to be one of these nagging wives who tell the hero he's got to have dinner with the family instead of going out and stopping that nuclear bomb from blowing up the city"? Everybody wants to be the hero. The women in my life are all very heroic.

I was really drawn to doing *Ghostbusters* because the idea of the original movie is so great: funny, smart people trying to defeat the supernatural with technology. It's so rich for more exploration. I told the studio, "You can't make this small." It has to be big and visual, which is why we did it in 3-D and came up with new tricks, like shooting the proton stream through the IMAX screen's black bars. Honestly, my favorite way to watch our movie is in IMAX, because it's such a different — and completely visual — experience.

What I love about what I do is we have to get it right only once. A lot of times we go in not knowing if we can get it right, and then there's that lightning-in-a-bottle moment when two actors connect, or some stunt goes a way you didn't think it would, or a train goes through the background of your shot right when you didn't expect it. That's what's so wonderful about the visual: You lock in time every single element you wanted to control or wanted to create or were lucky enough to find. It's these moments that bring that visual energy to an audience, and they get to watch it for hundreds of years after. ■

Taste Takes Time

BY **MARINA TWEED**

The Gourmand founder and editor in chief wants us to slow down and cultivate a discerning palate

Be it food or information, the more substance we (thoughtfully) consume, the more we gain. Our personal likes and dislikes are what make us interesting, and we can develop these preferences only through experience. So how, in a world of instant gratification, do we keep our sense of taste both individual and refined?

Everybody eats, but food is about so much more than just eating. My partner and I founded *The Gourmand* as a means to talk not just about food but about the culture that surrounds it. To tell the stories of people who are inspired by eating and drinking — whether they're artists or writers, filmmakers or chefs, designers or musicians — we talk to them about their inspirations, aspirations and experiences. The journal is also a place for us to collaborate with photographers, set designers and illustrators to produce photo essays, still-life features and documentary imagery, all inspired by the endlessly creative field of food. As editors, we see the magazine as a culmination of our personal interests and ideas, and its pages as a testament to food's communicative power. Essentially, *The Gourmand* is about taste — in every sense of the word.

The predominant purpose of taste is to keep us alive, to prevent us from eating poison. It's essential to our evolution, designed to entice us to eat a varied diet and stay in good health. And of course it provides the utter pleasure of eating.

We also use the word taste to describe our leanings in music, art, fashion, film or anything else with which we surround our physical or psychological selves. And the same word has been adopted to describe an experience — a taste of something new. On all counts, taste is one of the key ingredients that make us who we are.

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Taste buds are composed of some 50 to 100 taste-receptor cells bundled together on the tongue and epiglottis (the protective flap in the throat). These receptors are responsible for the detection of various tastes, commonly distinguished as sweet, salty, bitter, sour and umami. But it's the gustatory cortex in our brain that processes taste, and it is this part of the brain we can teach how to taste. By feeding it with information, chefs, sommeliers, food analysts anyone — can expand their sensory knowledge of flavor.

Taste takes time to develop, and it all starts in the womb. A fetus develops taste buds that can detect strong flavors through the amniotic fluid from as early as 13 weeks in utero. Once a baby is born, flavors can be passed on through the mother's breast milk. As the milk changes according to the mother's diet, the baby's library of flavors broadens.

Exposure to flavors at an early age contributes to the tolerance of certain foods. I was very aware of this while weaning my firstborn, and now at the age of four he enjoys eating spicy food as much as he does beans on toast. Flavor exposure enables children to accept foods within their culture — and explains why they may have an aversion toward other flavors.

Our taste in food is not something we're born with; it can be learned and refined over time, and the same is true of our cultural tastes. Fetuses can hear from as early as 18 weeks, and taking in sounds at such an early age helps familiarize them with the world they're about to enter. As with our taste in food, our taste in music is something we have to find: We can learn what we like or don't like only through discovery.

This journey of discovery is infinite. Throughout our lives our tastes can evolve as we're exposed to economic, ethical and environmental factors. I for one float between being a "free-form" carnivore to a fish-eating vegan depending on where I am in the world, what my body craves and what I've recently read or watched. And some things we can just outgrow (though I can't imagine I'll ever stop loving vanilla ice cream).

Our tastes are realized through knowledge and experience. Be it food, music, art or wine, we get the most out of the things we put the most into. It's key to our development that we allow ourselves the time to discover, experiment, play and digest. But in this age — when we can shop a pop star's look while Alexa queues up that same artist's latest album, or google the latest superfood as our fridge orders groceries, or Instagram the art others have "curated" for us while an algorithm selects films to watch on Netflix — time is hard to come by. Are we missing out on the exploration of our personal likes and dislikes, the adventure of discovering them and the pleasure of consuming them? Through social media and the amplification — as opposed to cultivation — of our own tastes, are we in fact not learning enough about ourselves?

Perhaps we should avoid being told what's in good taste, stop following the tastemakers and take the time to discover things for ourselves. After all, home-cooked food always tastes much better than ready-made. ■

I See What I Hear

BY **SACHA JENKINS**

From the Emmy-nominated creator of Showtime's Wu-Tang Clan: Of Mics and Men, a love letter to the songs and sounds that made him dream—and live

Music is cinematic. When this scribe listens to music, I see things that don't exist. Yet. Melody has the ability to score the scoreless. It has the ability either to combine imagination with desire to create something brand new or to pump to the surface feelings that have been bubbling deep below the recesses of the flesh.

It all boils down to the endless possibilities that sound offers us. Maybe we learned from nature, because nature is an accomplished musician. Sea breezes, bird chirps, cricket shrieks, a fallen tree that no human was around to hear make its last splash, a volcano popping off — I'm talking about the original bangin' beats right there. Somebody famously said that the hills are alive with the sound of music. Said individual wasn't bullshitting.

In nature, the duty of sound is to represent the life force of the immediate environment. This is why hip-hop is so appealing: The sound and culture are a reflection of and a reaction to their immediate surroundings. When you listen to Public Enemy's *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*, you hear sirens and air-raid alarms booming behind Chuck D's growl, the way you would hear Sitting Bull's wail accompanied by hawks and stampeding bison on the Lakota plains. The Bomb Squad — the chief architects of that classic PE sound — was referencing the chaos of everyday inner-city life in their fearless narratives. Most bomb squads deactivate bombs; Hank and Keith Shocklee and Eric "Vietnam" Sadler dropped them on our heads

For years, I was a music journalist. I had the great fortune of spending time with the Gs of the era I represent: Nas, 50 Cent, Eminem, Roxanne Shanté. Their childhood experiences had a heavy hand in the music they would make. The chaos and trauma they faced as shorties would be documented in their lyrics and supported and amplified by producer greats like DJ Premier, Dr. Dre, Marley Marl and Pete Rock — men who also knew the maddening sounds of the hood all too well. Still, they were masters who reimagined ugliness and pain, trumpeters who honored the beauty in the struggle and the triumph that awaits after the last bar and beat fade.

As a director of films, I can assure you that there's a music video of my own playing in my mind for every song I love, even if a video already exists for it. When I watch TV, I don't see images or have visions of objects or people other than the ones I see flashing before me. Television is literal. Linear. Binary. Which is fine if you want to stay inside the places these programs can take you.

But sound has an algebraic quality, shrouded and mysterious (at least to me) yet definitive. Important. Nurturing and warm. Necessary and essential. The sounds that vibrate here on earth? There is an abundance. Hip-hop has mastered the idea and manifestation of the so-called sound collage, pointing country music in the direction of disco, in the direction of jazz, in the direction of zydeco and so on. For many of us coming up around the way, the infinite textures of hip-hop music nurtured us and took us to places our parents couldn't afford to. In hip-hop we heard Africa, the place our public schools often characterized as "uncivilized." We heard the sounds of Africa in our "black" American music, which helped us better understand who we are. Maybe I hadn't physically been to Africa at that point, but by my teens, I damn sure knew what it sounded like.

When you take the time to count all the distinct sounds and styles that hip-hop has touched, you realize that the keepers of the culture are actually mad scientists, melding together strands of DNA often kept separated by the nightmare that has soiled the American dream for those of us who are a tad bit darker than baby blue.

As for those music videos in my mind, my American dream goes like this: Whenever I hear that Smashing Pumpkins joint "Cherub Rock" off *Siamese Dream*, I see teenage black girls rockin' those percussive cheerleader steps and chants (there's Africa!) in sync with Jimmy Chamberlin's rattlesnake-y littledrummer-boy snare runs (Africa again!). To me, my vision is akin to what happens when your chocolate winds up in someone else's peanut butter: delicious.

Another great song: Kool G Rap's "Take 'Em to War" (also featuring B-1 and MF Grimm). It's ominous, haunting and sneaky in the way the bass lick is massaged into your cranium. Then Grimm's words seep in: "Fuck what you heard, crime pays / And always, unorthodox, I hold my pistol sideways / We kill crews, hearts go numb / And if retaliation comes then yo, fuck it, it just comes."

With this I see a gaggle of disgruntled employees hovering around a water cooler, scheming how to physically remove their CEO. Suits and ties suddenly taking the law into their own hands — which is essentially what Kool G and crew are doing inside the song. When someone interjects, "Fuck Pataki," they're railing against then governor of New York George Pataki's long-ass arm of the law. G Rap and company weren't donning suits, though strictly ski masks and leather gloves.

This is what I see because life often apes art, and the sounds we hear are married to the moments we experience in real time. Shit is wilder than the jungle. ■

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Touch Is More Than Touch

Your skin has a mind of its own, and other musings from the writer behind Moan: Anonymous Essays on Female Orgasm

BY **EMMA KOENIG**

Years ago, I had an uncomfortable sexual experience. As much as I wanted to surrender to bliss, nothing felt good, and the other person did not pick up on my nonverbal signals: my tense body, my blank face, my silence. He assumed my experience was a positive one.

Most of us think we're smart enough, poised enough and experienced enough to do the "right" thing in scenarios like this. We think we'll be able to identify why we're uncomfortable and voice our concerns in a strong yet sensitive, yet *casual* tone. But in that moment, I couldn't speak up. It wasn't until later that I could name the cause: I'd wanted to be polite. Overwhelmed by the physical sensation, I had unconsciously prioritized his experience over mine. (Apparently he and I had that in common.)

As I started to examine all the things that had led up to this moment of self- imposed silence, I was struck by a need to immerse myself in the sexual experiences of others. I spent years collecting women's stories surrounding orgasm and sexuality, which eventually became the book *Moan: Anonymous Essays on Female Orgasm*. I was striving to create something that explored the spectrum of female desire, both the joys and the frustrations. Digesting all those stories, and the reader reactions they inspired, led to the deceptively simple conclusion that touch is about way more than touch.

We've all seen the articles filled with tips on the best angles to hit the right points to have the best orgasm of our lives! And though I support anything that helps us zero in on feeling good, it's myopic to talk about sex as though it were an exercise class, where the most important factors are form and reps. Perhaps now more than ever, our sexual health — our sexual *morality* — demands that we consider the abstract forces informing our most enveloping of physical faculties.

TOUCH IS CULTURAL

Here's an exercise: Make a list of all the ways the country has changed in regard to sex and gender since the time you first had sex. (This won't work as well if you lost your virginity yesterday, but in this insane, 24-hour news cycle–nightmare from the depths of hell, it could still apply!)

What's on your list? Maybe it cites medical advancements such as the HPV vaccine, the FDA approval of PrEP or the over-the-counter liberation of Plan B. Maybe it dips into the advent of social media, which has nurtured cyber-harassment, revenge porn and the incel movement. Maybe it includes #MeToo, the growing media representation of LGBTQIA people, the latest threats to abortion access or the fact that our president has 17 (at press time) allegations of sexual misconduct against him.

The backdrop of our sex lives is under constant construction, and so is our relationship to touching and being touched. We're contending with new information, attitudes, language and laws, all of which can affect levels of physical sensitivity. While these anxieties may manifest in different ways during sex, a good starting point is the acknowledgement, shared by all partners, that it's not always possible to drop these concerns at the bedroom door.

Simply put, if politicians were crusading against sugar cones, it would probably be harder to enjoy your ice cream. And if you were to invite someone to your favorite parlor, it would be helpful to discuss how that hard-line anti-cone agenda might impact your enjoyment.

TOUCH IS EMOTIONAL

Emotion lives in our bodies. Whenever we encounter situations in which we want to cry, scream or simply speak out, we tense up. We clench our jaws, raise our shoulders and squeeze our hands into fists. Years of layered-on tension impact our bodies and our minds: We store the things that happen to us inside ourselves, and even if we're doing the work to exorcise our demons, we're all carrying around a lot of shit — especially when it comes to something as powerful as sex.

Getting touched can arouse feelings ranging from ecstasy to terror, and we may not be intellectually able to name those feelings in the moment; the message can be as primal as "This feels good" or "This feels bad." But however schematic the emotional language may be, it's important to be tuned in to it. When we disregard our feelings or pretend complex emotion isn't possible or allowed during sex, we're setting the stage for miscommunication, or worse.

TOUCH IS INDIVIDUAL

Here's the simplest takeaway of all, reinforced constantly over the four years I spent collecting people's sex stories: The same shit doesn't work on everyone.

We all have different offerings — and allergies — on our sexual

menus. It can be maddening to discover that the thing that drove your last partner wild with pleasure disgusts your current bedfellow, but remember that there's joy in the endless variety and potential for experimentation, and that touch can expand and evolve.

Now, I'm not insisting that we over- analyze every erotic insecurity and awkward moment. I'm merely suggesting that we have some baseline compassion and conscience—that we enter sexual scenarios (and, ideally, the spaces that come before them) with the awareness that they take place within a dense ecosystem of personal, cultural and, of course, biological forces.

It's my hope that this awareness will help us all find two things: our voices when touch is uncomfortable, and the freedom to explore all the pleasure touch can bring. ■

PLAYBOY'S party jokes

SEX talk about sex in 2019 the way they used to talk about having a baby: "The gender doesn't matter to me, as long as it's healthy."—*Bri Pruett*

MUTUAL masturbation is like paying a handyman to assemble an Ikea bed instead of putting it together yourself. Either way, you're going to take a nap afterward, but you'll have a better time if someone does it for you.—*Adam Levin*

A girl once told me she wanted to experiment in bed, so I poured a bunch of baking soda and vinegar into her belly button and yelled "*Behold the majesty of Krakatoa!*" Anyway, we're married now.—*Ian Karmel*

YOU can tell a man is about to end things when he starts listing all your good qualities in a really sad voice. "You're smart. You're successful. You're funny." Oh no. And you're dumping me!—*Marcia Belsky*

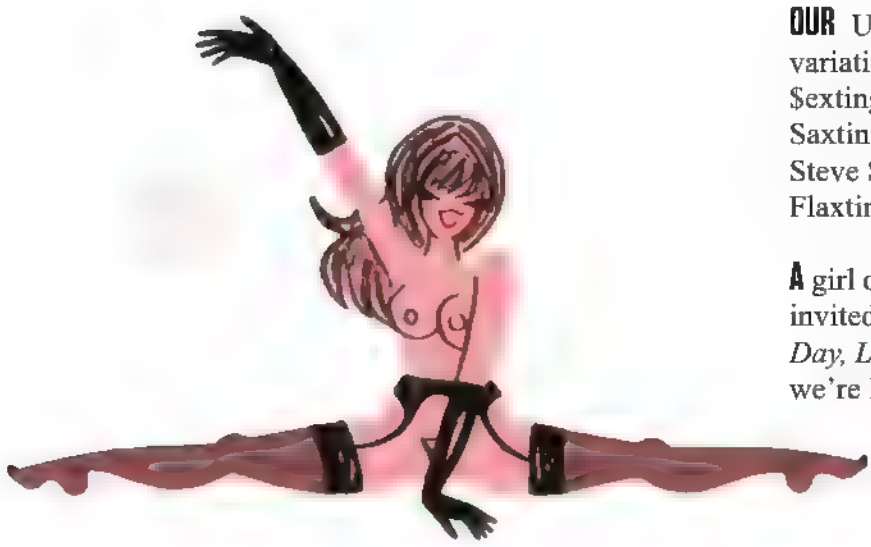
A man asked his reclusive brother what he'd been up to.

"I joined one of those multilevel marketing schemes," the brother replied.

"Huh," the man said skeptically. "Looking to make a little money on the side?"

"No, I'm looking for people to stop inviting me to stuff or contacting me for any reason."—*Joseph Scialabba*

A girl once told me she wanted to role-play in bed, so I threw 20-sided dice as a saving roll against a cacodemon's fire attack. Anyway, we're married now.—*I.K.*



I'M not sure if anybody knows this, but female dogs refer to doggy style as "the only thing my boring husband ever wants to do."—*Amy Silverberg*

LIFEHACK: If you stand outside a nice restaurant wearing a red jacket, people will literally give you the keys to their car.—*J.S.*

WE'VE all seen the articles asking why millennials are having less sex than baby boomers. Well, you'd have less sex too if you could masturbate to anime porn while ordering Chipotle.—*Andy Haynes*

IF you're not five minutes early, you're five minutes late. Unless you text "OMW" and just show up whenever.—*B.P.*

IT'S scary how happy the skip intro button makes us. We're all so horned up for TV that even Netflix is like, "You wanna ditch this foreplay bullshit?" and we're like, "PUT IT IN!"—*J.S.*

LOOK on the bright side: Once you lose your virginity, technically your entire life is postcoital.—*Robert Buscemi*

I used to have sex with straight men like it was going out of style. Little did I know, it absolutely was.—*B.P.*

OUR Unabashed Dictionary has been enhanced with four more variations on the term *sexting* …
$exting = Sexy texting with a prostitute.
Saxting = Sexy texting with the ghost of Clarence Clemons.
Steve Saxting = Sexy texting with lifetime .281 hitter Steve Sax.
Flaxting = Sexy texting with a burlap sack of ancient grain.—*I.K.*

A girl once told me she wanted to bring another man into bed, so we invited the beloved actor known for his starring roles in *Groundhog Day, Lost in Translation* and *Caddyshack* to sleep with us. Anyway, we're Murrayed now. —*I.K.*

Model **@MARENLASALLE**

Photography by **ARTHUR ST. JOHN @ARTHURSTJOHN**
HMUA **TAYLOR JAZZ @TAYLOR_JAZZ**
Location **PHILLIP LAMOND @PHILLIPLAMOND1**

WHAT IS YOUR NAME?
Maren La Salle

WHERE WERE YOU BORN?
Huntington Memorial Hospital. Pasadena, CA.

WHERE DO YOU LIVE NOW?
Currently back in Pasadena.

FAVORITE STYLE OF MUSIC?
Anything I can sing or dance to.

FAVORITE MOVIE OF ALL TIME?
Don't have one.

FAVORITE ACTOR?
Don't have one.

FAVORITE COLOR?
Red, black, white.

FAVORITE FOOD?
Japanese

READ THE BOOK OR WATCH THE MOVIE?
Watch the movie

DESCRIBE YOUR PERFECT MAN.
Responsible, self- aware, hard-working, emotionally available, intelligent, funny, gentle, caring, loving, and loyal.

DESCRIBE YOUR PERFECT DATE.
When he opens his mouth; he means what he says and says what he means. Someone who can walk the walk. Not just talk the talk.

FAVORITE BODY PART ON YOU?
My stomach

FAVORITE BODY PART ON A MAN?
Eyes

ANY PET PEEVES?
Liars

TELL US SOMETHING ABOUT YOU NOT TOO MANY PEOPLE KNOW.
Elise is my first name. Maren is my middle name. Everyone in my family goes by our middle names, it's a family tradition.

DESCRIBE YOURSELF USING ONLY 3 ADJECTIVES.
Intelligent, Resilient, Nurturing

IF YOU CAN CHANGE ANY ONE THING ABOUT YOU, WHAT WOULD IT BE?
I don't agree with this question as I've grown to love and accept myself as I am.

DO YOU LIKE TO TRAVEL?
Yes, Love to travel.

WHERE IS YOUR FAVORITE VACATION DESTINATION?
Depends who I'm with.

WHAT WOULD YOU CONSIDER TO BE YOUR BIGGEST CHALLENGE AS A MODEL SO FAR?
Staying in the gym consistently!

CONGRATS ON YOUR PLAYBOY AUSTRALIA COVER! WHAT DOES THIS MEAN TO YOU?
Thank you! This is a dream come true. I still can't believe it. This is so special to me. And most important for me to honor the death of my uncle Johnny. He lived in Australia and was working on the world atlas map finding new species to put on the map. He recently passed away.

HAVE YOU EVER BEEN TO AUSTRALIA?
Yes!
My uncle, my dads' brother actually relocated his family to Australia. We went during Christmas one year to visit.

WOULD YOU LIKE TO VISIT SOMEDAY?
Yes! I would love to go back!

WHERE DO YOU SEE YOURSELF IN 10 YEARS?
Happily married with kids living mom life while running a business from home.

Stiff COMPETITION

WHEN AN AMBITIOUS IMITATOR TOOK AIM AT PLAYBOY, THE MAGAZINE WAS FORCED TO CONFRONT A HAIRY ISSUE

BY **PATTY FARMER**

The Playboy Rabbit Head found itself in unfamiliar territory in 1969: *Penthouse* ads. Bob Guccione, editor-publisher of the upstart British magazine, had decided to take his publication to the States, and he wanted advertisers to know exactly what he was targeting. "We're going rabbit-hunting," read the cut line below an unsubtle image of the Rabbit in a rifle's crosshairs. Hugh Hefner's hugely successful formula for PLAYBOY, it seemed, was too tempting for imitators to ignore.

Guccione's Rabbit hunt, and Hefner's response to it, soon escalated into what became punningly known as the "pubic wars" — a clash in which the two print titans battled for full-frontal supremacy of the publishing industry's lucrative nude-mag niche.

• • •

Guccione deserves credit: PLAYBOY was a smart target. Since its December 1953 debut, circulation had climbed steadily, reaching 5.7 million by December 1969. Over those 16 years, Hefner had captured the market — other men's magazines were to PLAYBOY what fleas are to a bear. By daring to be more risqué, PLAYBOY had left *Esquire*, its inspiration and nearest competitor, in the dust. As *Esquire* editor Clay Felker bluntly put it to *Rolling Stone*, "PLAYBOY had out-titted us."

In 1969 Guccione saw a similar opportunity and decided to take a shot at Hef, publishing the first U.S. issue of *Penthouse* that September. (It had been a U.K. lad mag for four years.) That February, the 147-year-old *Saturday Evening Post* had effectively gone out of business. These two

milestones are more closely related than one might think. At the dawn of the 1970s, the industry was rapidly changing: Old-time general interest, family-friendly magazines were losing their readership to television; even venerable *Life* magazine, long a publishing staple, would switch from a weekly to an intermittent schedule in 1972. But specialty magazines, those covering subjects from sports to science to automobiles, were growing in popularity, and the highest growth area was the one least likely to be served by TV. This was the PLAYBOY audience: mostly young to middle-aged men who wanted to look at semi-naked models and read intellectually stimulating short stories and nonfiction. That format, combining revealing photos of women with excellent editorial fare, was Hefner's masterstroke — and what Guccione sought to replicate.

• • •

The Brooklyn-born, New Jersey–raised Guccione had originally set out to become a painter and, like Hefner, had tried his hand at cartooning, though he eventually became a photographer. Living in London in the early 1960s, he and his wife launched a photo service that sold provocative pinups of young women via mail order ($2, or the British equivalent, for 10 pictures). Having had his cartoons rejected by virtually every magazine in town, he resolved to launch his own title to publish them. An informal study of London newsstands convinced him that the most successful periodical in England was the Chicago-based PLAYBOY. "I thought, I'll do a magazine using the same formula — pretty girls, highbrow editorial — but aimed at a British audience," Guccione says in an interview included in *Filthy Gorgeous*, the 2013 documentary about his life. To woo prospective investors, "I brought a copy of PLAYBOY around with me, and I said, 'Just imagine this with the name *Penthouse* on it.' "

Premiering in England in 1965, *Penthouse* was a hit. Guccione gradually worked out his plan to launch in the States. He connected with the largest magazine distributor in America, the Curtis Circulation Company, which by that time was keen to find new profit channels — it had just lost a major cash cow with the demise of *The Saturday Evening Post*.

Guccione's pitch wasn't far off from his eventual product: He copied PLAYBOY practically feature for feature. Instead of a Centerfold showcasing a monthly Playmate, Guccione's foldout spotlighted a monthly Pet; where PLAYBOY had the long running *Little Annie Fanny comic, Penthouse* installed *Oh, Wicked Wanda*, a rather grungy knockoff of Harvey Kurtzman's pop culture classic. Guccione launched his own Penthouse Club in London in response to Hefner's Playboy Club empire. Even the word penthouse stemmed from Playboy history, being the title and setting of Hefner's first late-night TV series, *Playboy's Penthouse*.

So what did Penthouse give readers that was new? More skin, more heat. The major weapon in Guccione's arsenal was his willingness to depict what PLAYBOY had not.

"In the wake of the so-called free-love '60s, *Penthouse* chose to break open the market and distinguish itself from PLAYBOY by being raunchier: more overtly sexual photographs, pubic pictures, bizarro letters to the editor, models who ran the gamut as opposed to PLAYBOY's girl-next-door types," says David Friend, author of *The Naughty Nineties: The Triumph of the American Libido*. Although it flirted w ith pubic hair on a couple of occasions, including a pictorial of actress and dancer Paula Kelly in August 1969, PLAYBOY had never shown an explicit frontal shot. Guccione saw the open door and walked through it.

The February 1970 *Penthouse* showed a hint of pubic hair in one pictorial, followed by several pubic-hair-revealing shots in the April edition, causing small-town censors to yank the issue off newsstands. Censors may have been incensed, but readers were beguiled, and by September 1972 *Penthouse*'s sales had climbed to 2.2 million — nearly 10 times what it had started at just three years earlier. That was still less than a third of PLAYBOY's circulation, which had hit an all-time high of more than 7 million, but Hefner eventually came to feel adjustments were needed.

"At first Hef tried to avoid engaging or responding," remembers Dick Rosen zweig, Hefner's right-hand man who had been with the company since 1958. "He definitely tried to convey a 'So what?' attitude in the beginning."

But soon enough PLAYBOY was showing more and more of the pubic area — territory that had previously been obscured or blocked. In the January 1971 issue, Hefner allowed a peek of blonde pubic hair in Liv Lindeland's Playmate pictorial and a year later went full frontal with a tasteful Centerfold of Playmate Marilyn Cole. Much more provocative poses followed. This "arms" race—not to mention legs, breasts and buttocks — evolved beyond full-frontal nudity to other arenas previously unexplored by PLAYBOY: fetishism, girl-on-girl, women touching themselves.

"The point was cultural and aesthetic but also market driven," says Friend via e-mail. "The PLAYBOY philosophy, according to *Penthouse*, was, in effect, your father's ethos — sexuality disguised. *Penthouse* was for younger and more liberated (read lowbrow, low-forehead) readers, epitomized by the crotch shots. PLAYBOY was somewhat crotchety in comparison and hid its treasures amid serious fiction and big-name bylines." To use Felker's construction, *Penthouse* wanted to out crotch PLAYBOY.

"Hef was conflicted," remembers former art director Kerig Pope about the magazine's new direction, "but the art department made it clear they were in support of showing more."

The photography was far from the only PLAYBOY staple affected by the changes. "The whole book was 'heated up,' " from fashion to articles, as Thomas Weyr recounts in Reaching for Paradise, his extensively researched volume on the company. The shift even applied to LeRoy Neiman's famous Femlin drawings. "An editorial decision was relayed to me to introduce pubic hair on my lovable, wholesome creation," writes Neiman in the 50th anniversary collection celebrating his work. "At first I resisted, mainly because it posed a design problem. Eventually I came up with a solution regarding the pubic hair matter…a simple black triangle."

Although the rise of *Penthouse* seems the proximate cause for the changes, Hefner claimed there were other considerations governing his actions. "At the top of the list was the more permissive attitude in films," he told *Rolling Stone*. *Deep Throat*, after all, had come out in 1972, taking porn mainstream. "The decision to make the magazine what I call, not more permissive but more mature, is a matter of what we felt, in our judgment, our part of society was ready for."

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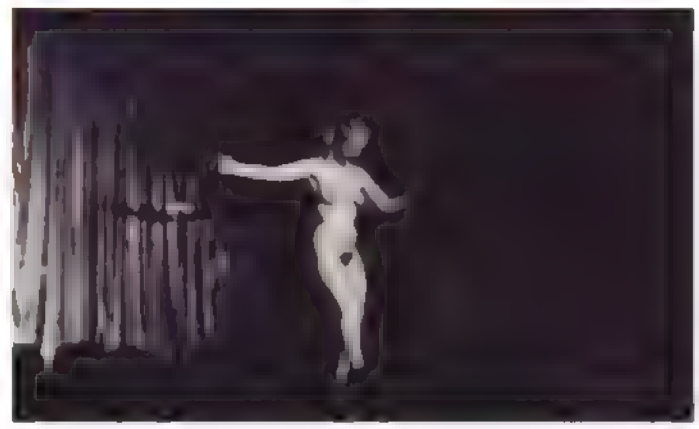
It wasn't just *Penthouse* that was crowding the field of men's magazines: *Coq, Players, Dude* and *Genesis* were just a few



Previous spread: *Paula Kelly's August 1969 pictorial is often credited as* PLAYBOY*'s first display of pubic hair* ***Top left:*** *Liv Lindeland's exposed tuft in January 1971 was a Playmate first, in this shot from her Playmate of the Year feature, she continues the trend* ***Top right:*** *January 1972 Playmate Marilyn Cole, shown here in a photo from her 1973 Playmate of the Year pictorial, was the first full-frontal Centerfold* ***Right:*** *August 1959 marks the true earliest appearance of pubic hair in* PLAYBOY*; the photo was retouched so the dancer's uncovered pubis might be mistaken for a G-string*

of the titles to enter the fray. Gallery was an even more direct clone of PLAYBOY than Penthouse had ever tried to be, renting an office less than a mile from Hefner's staff. "I guess I've been flattered more sincerely — and blatantly — than any other magazine publisher in history," Hefner once quipped. In 1972 Playboy purchased the French title Lui and changed it to Oui, hoping that this younger, bolder, kinkier and more "continental" version of PLAYBOY could dig directly into Penthouse's circulation. (After a blockbuster first year, Oui sank steadily into the red before Playboy parted with it in 1981.) Then, in 1974, Larry Flynt's Hustler a rrived, quickly e stablishing that Flynt wouldn't hesitate to go beyond what either Hef ner or Guccione could abide.

For Hefner, the "war" culminated in late 1975 with back-to-back controversial covers: Two bare-breasted models embraced under the teaser line SAPPHO: STUNNING PORTRAITS OF WOMEN IN LOVE on the October cover; a seated woman, one hand down her panties, blouse and legs spread wide, graced the November issue. Readers may have welcomed the more suggestive content, but many companies buying full-page ads did not. "PLAYBOY's foray into explicit shots, lesbianism and female masturbation triggered outrage among advertisers, who deluged its offices with complaints about obscenity," Steven Watts writes in his Hefner biography, *Mr. Playboy*. There was $40 million in annual ad revenue at stake, a Playboy executive fumed. Hefner decided to change course. "Gentlemen, we have lost our compass," he declared, telling his team to cool down the content. "I [told] my staff we would not go down the road of imitating our imitators," he later said.

That December he promised shareholders and newsstands alike that moving forward his covers would be less risqué. Besides keeping advertisers happy, there was perhaps another simple reason behind the revised stance: "Hefner's heart was not in the raunch war," as Weyr put it.

• • •

The pubic wars were, in Hefner's own words, "much ado about foliage." Considering the tumultuous era from the perspective of 2013, Hef remarked, "It's almost comical to look back now at all the fuss over pubic hair." Indeed, photos that 50 years ago qualified as racy today seem practically innocuous, even quaint; in the intervening decades, attitudes and norms have changed significantly.

Those changes have naturally affected the business, though readers may be surprised: Today in PLAYBOY's pages, how much skin (and hair) is shown is a decision made not by the editor but by the model — a practice that is perhaps the biggest reveal of all. ■

Megg's Pleasure

IT'S BEEN A HORRIFYING WEEK OF TURMOIL AND ANXIETY FOR MEGG. TONIGHT SHE'S ACTUALLY IN A GOOD MOOD AND APPROACHES HER LONG-TERM BOYFRIEND, MOGG...

MOGG, IT'S FRIDAY NIGHT! LET'S DO SOMETHING FUN. I NEED TO BLOW OFF SOME STEAM!

MNGH.

BY SIMON HANSELMANN

I'M FEELING A LITTLE BIT FRISKY.

HOW ARE YOU FEELING?

UGHN.

I JUST ATE TWO BEAN BURRITOS.

I THINK I'M DYING...

I GOTTA GO LAY DOWN.

...

=SIGH= FUCK THIS.

HEY, MOGG, I'M GOING OUT. BACK LATER.

WHAT? O-OKAY...

HEY, WEREWOLF JONES, ANYTHING HAPPENING TONIGHT?

OH, YEAH?

HEY!

HEY.

HI, BOOGER.

HI.

SO WHAT'S GOING ON?

NOTHING MUCH. GETTING FUCKED UP.

... SEE WHERE THE NIGHT TAKES US...

HOW ARE YOU DOING, MEGG? I HAVEN'T SEEN YOU IN A WHILE.

OH, UH, I'M OKAY, I GUESS...

I'M A BIT, UH, A BIT FED UP WITH MOGG.

HE NEVER WANTS TO GO ANYWHERE OR DO ANYTHING.

HAHA, I'M... I'M SO FUCKING HORNY RIGHT NOW!

SORRY, TOO MUCH INFORMATION.

NO, THAT'S OKAY.

I'M JUICED UP AND COULD FUCK AN ARMY TO DEATH.

YEAH, I JUST JERKED OFF LIKE FIVE MINUTES AGO.

COULD GO AGAIN. EASY.

WE'RE VERY "SEX POSITIVE" OVER HERE.

HAHA, TO THE POINT OF EXHAUSTION.

...

SIP SIP SIP

HMMM.

WHAT SAY I FIRE UP THE SEX BOX?

SEX BOX?

AND SO:

WE CAN HAVE A LITTLE EYES WIDE SHUT PARTY.

OOH, LIKE A D.I.Y. FIFTY SHADES!

WHAT DO YOU SAY, LADIES?

I JUST RAN A WET WIPE OVER MY PITS.

SMACK

OOH!

...

HAVE THESE TEDDIES BEEN WASHED?

YEAH, YEAH, OF COURSE. SURE, SURE.

WHAT KIND OF OUTFIT IS THIS?

THIS SHIT'S SO WEIRD...

WHEN DID THIS BECOME A "THING"?

AND HOW MUCH MORE STRAPPY CAN THEY MAKE THINGS?

THERE HAS TO BE A LIMIT, RIGHT?

I THINK WE MAY HAVE FOUND IT...

THAT LOOKS LIKE MOUNTAIN-CLIMBING GEAR.

OH, THAT ACTUALLY IS CLIMBING GEAR.

I GOT ALL HARD AT ROCK CLIMBING THIS ONE TIME. SO I STOLE THAT.

OOH, LOOKING GOOD IN THAT PIZZA THONG, MEGG!

OH, THANK YOU...

YOU WANT ME TO... STUFF YOUR CRUST?

=COUGH= UGHN =COUGH=

YEAH, UH, I WAS ABOUT TO TAKE IT OFF...

FEELS KINDA WEIRD HAVING CHEESE CREEPING UP MY ASS.

OKAY, OKAY.

HOW ABOUT WE HOP IN THE SWING?

SWING?

FOLLOW ME, MY ANGELS!

AHA!

THESE DILDOS ARE DONE BOILING. FANTASTIC!

OKAY... YOU READY?

TA DA!

blink 182

MY EUROPEAN SEX SWING!

KIDS ARE AWAY FOR THE WEEKEND WITH THEIR MOTHER...

GOT THE WHOLE HOUSE TO MYSELF!

LET'S SWING!

AW, DUDE...

THIS IS WAY TOO SQUALID...

WHA?

SKW-ORL-ID? WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?

ALL RIGHT, SHOTGUN! I'm IN FIRST!

MEGG, GRAB THAT DILDO OVER THERE...

C'MON, LET'S GET THIS SHOW ON THE ROAD.

I GOT SOME FISH STICKS IN THE OVEN!

CRACK!

AAARRRRGHH!

MY TOOTH!

FUCK!

OW!

I'M GOING TO PUT SOME CLOTHES ON...

ME TOO.

WHAT? IT'S OVER?!

WHERE ARE YOU GOING?

I'VE STILL GOT AN ERECTION!

...

Café Romantica

THISH PIZZA ISH FUCKING AMAZING.

I ACTUALLY WANT THISH PIZZA IN MY ASSH.

MMM, THEY'RE PLAYING SEINFELD TONIGHT INSTEAD OF MUSIC.

MORE BOOZE!

IT'S NICE TO BE ABLE TO HAVE A CONVERSHATION.

UH-HUH, YEAH, MORE BOOZE.

UGHN, SHO MUCH GREASHE... SHO DRUNK...

THISH... THISH ISH PLEASHURE.

OOH, THE POOL TABLE JUST OPENED UP!

UH-OH...

WHAT?

WHAT?

I-I THINK MY BUTT PLUG JUST...

WENT UP INTO MY BODY...

EMERGENCY

THE END!

RACHEL ASHLEY
JOHNSON
Models @RACHELDOLL23
Photography by WANTHY D @WANTHY_D
MUA JESSICA PILLADO @JESSICA_PILLADO
PH LEO ALDERMAN @LEO.ALDERMAN @LSAPUBLICATIONS

Tell us something surprising about you?
Something surprising about me is that I danced ballet for ten years, I danced with the San Francisco, San Rafael, and Moscow Ballet Company.

Were you excited to shoot for Playboy?
I'm absolutely thrilled to be published in Playboy Australia! This is an incredible way to begin the new year! Thank you so much Playboy!

What inspires you?
What inspires me is being ambitious and creating my dreams into reality.

Why did you choose to pursue a career in modelling?
I chose to pursue modeling after the end of a relationship.

Who do you look up to in the modelling industry?
I admire Kate Upton and Bella Hadid in the modeling industry.

What are some of your hobbies?
I enjoy traveling, boating, swimming, yoga, music, shopping, art and wine tasting.

Name three things on your bucket list?
First on my bucket list would be sell a mansion. Second would be travel to Maldives. Third would be own a Rolls Royce.

Turn-ons
Success, wealth, well travelled, emotional connection and a good heart.

Turn-offs
Would be narrow minded, rudeness, and being unreliable.

Describe to us your perfect date.
I absolutely love traveling. On a date I love the jet set life of embarking on a trip together and creating lasting memories.

Which world capital would you most like to visit, and why?
Absolutely Paris! Paris is beautiful, breathtaking, historical, and charming.

What is your mantra?
My mantra is to always be the best possible version of yourself.

bliss your
heart

With psilocybin once again in the running to become a legitimate treatment for anxiety, we sent a writer deep into the Mexican jungle to face her fears. Did she find inner peace?

BY **MICHELLE JANIKIAN**

ILLUSTRATION BY **MAX LOEFFLER**

I arrive in a van with six other Americans after traveling on a long, stomach-turning dirt road to the heart of the jungle outside Playa del Carmen, Mexico. The resort is a maze of wooden boardwalks, but the foliage still creeps through and grazes my limbs. We are led, one by one, down overgrown paths that open into large event spaces, including the appropriately dubbed Buddha Hall, where three days of transformative psilocybin ceremonies will take place.

We're a total of 20 participants. We eat dinner together in a decadent, palace-like setting and play Two Truths and a Lie to break the ice before heading to bed. It's still early. I lie in my room — a private, nearly square enclosure with wall-length windows overlooking dense greenery — while I patiently wait for daylight.

The next morning is a blur. There's dosing information, contracts to sign and the group activity of "intentions setting"— a discussion during which almost everyone cries, myself included. I reveal my experiences with drug abuse and depression, the story of a friend's death and my recovery afterward. It comes out easily because everyone around me is emotional; they have their own reasons for being here.

First-person research for my upcoming book, *Your Psilocybin Mushroom Companion*, is what has led me to the Buena Vida Psilocybin Retreat in the Yucatán Peninsula's tropical wonderland. The tag line of this roving retreat is "Embark on a journey of a lifetime with the help of magical fungi."

For the 19 others, their journeys to this moment may not have started with a simple Google search as mine did, but I suspect they're here because of the hard-to-ignore attention psilocybin has received of late — in particular, the reports that this psychoactive compound, found in more than 100 species of mushroom of the genus *Psilocybe*, may assist in treating several mental health issues and disorders. Having paid $3,000 for the weeklong experience, they're here to begin healing from personal traumas I can't begin to understand.

Although psychedelic drugs are most closely associated with the hippie culture of the 1960s, interest in them has remained consistent over the years. In 2016, the *Journal of Psychopharmacology* published two studies that determined that doses of psilocybin, which alters perception, eased cancer patients' distress. In 2017, the Global Drug Survey named mushrooms the safest drug on the planet. New York University and Johns Hopkins University recently conducted clinical trials, the results of which lend credence to the argument that psilocybin could work as a therapy for otherwise treatment-resistant depression, addiction and anxiety. While the Drug Enforcement Administration still lists the mushroom compound as a Schedule I substance, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration has designated it a "breakthrough therapy," opening the door for expedited clinical trials to be conducted by Compass Pathways, a mental health research firm. Why wouldn't we, with the proper guidance from this retreat's shamans, see positive results?

The Buena Vida retreat — founded in 2015 by Amanda Schendel, a "psychedelic expert" whose previous careers include positions in sales and comedy — maintains that its goal is "to provide safe access to healing plant medicines within the context of ritual and ceremony." Thus, before the first of the three mushroom ceremonies commences, we're encouraged to light a candle on an altar — a small stage adorned with objects of significance and offerings to the spirits and elements of the earth — and write down our intentions. I scribble a laundry list of emotional goals I would like to achieve over the next six hours, which is my first mistake, and wait for my name to be called. When it is, I'm given a fragrant spray of *agua de florida* to purify my spirit. The shaman proceeds to sit me down. I get chills as my doubt about her power fades with the smoke from the sacred tobacco she's wafting. I'm given a clay mug of mushroom tea. The serving is one and a half grams.

The aroma of palo santo ("holy wood") burning with sage engulfs me. My tea is steeping and my mind races as I ready myself on my yoga mat. The 20 of us drink our tea in unison. Most of the group then lie down and close their eyes, surrendering to the medicine. I remain sitting up, partly to watch people's reactions and partly because I find myself enchanted by the shaman's echoing voice.

Even though I know the lighting is dim, it suddenly feels unbearably bright. My limbs start to become limp, exhausted. I chuckle at the feeling, lie back and close my eyes. But instead of

finding peace or feeling blissed out, my mind is chaotic and my thoughts are negative. *Why do people do this, again?* I feel nauseated as the drug rumbles through my insides. The shaman's voice turns haunting, vibrating through the pavilion. I'm struggling to let go, hesitant to allow the mushrooms to do their work.

The anxiety I've felt leading up to this trip — anxiety specifically tied to writing my book — grows vicious. I worry that I'm not qualified to write a mushroom guide. I'm worthless. I'm stupid. I try sitting up and opening my eyes, but the thoughts continue, and I start to cry. There are no trippy visuals to distract me. I want to get out, to be alone, but I signed a waiver promising I would stay in the ceremony space. A facilitator brings me tissues and sits with me.

I try again to go back inward. I lie down and close my eyes, but the overriding voice in my head screams at me to kill myself. I have to sit up. I can't handle it.

These drugs are dangerous, I think, and I feel the weight of everyone who may read my book and take my advice. It's too much pressure. I keep bawling. A mountain of soggy tissues grows beside me. I'm a fraud.

It's another four hours before my negative thoughts dry up. Facilitators bring around a tray of fruit, signaling the end of the ceremony. I leave as a shell of myself, brewing a crying-induced headache. I wonder if other people went through the same thing, but everyone else seems effervescent at dinner time. We eat in a space that resembles a spooky, overgrown Chinese restaurant. Some of my favorite foods are on the table — falafel, pita, hummus — but eating seems foreign. I listen to others talk about their relaxing experiences, their crazy visions. Am I broken?

The next morning I'm raw, and Advil can't touch my headache. I sleep through yoga and rush to get changed so I don't miss breakfast. Surviving today will require coffee. Immediately after breakfast, we have an "integration meeting" on the rooftop terrace, which glitters with Indian teahouse–style decorations. I strain to get comfortable as I absorb everyone's journeys. Most describe good trips. When it's my turn, I start crying again. I suggest I need to talk to a facilitator one-on-one. People are understanding. The group moves on.

I continue to feel exposed; tears flood at the simplest thoughts. When I try talking to others I feel a bit better, less alone. In the afternoon I swim with some people in a cenote (a limestone swimming hole) at the center of the grounds, though I still feel distant. After dinner I join everyone for what they're calling an "ecstatic dance party." We spread glow sticks on the floor, and I start to move around, pushing out my heavy energy with the music's beat. Tears again rush down my face.

I feel lighter by the day of the second ceremony. I make it to yoga class but bail halfway through meditation to take a walk in the woods with a woman around my age from the Midwest and a man at the other end of his 30s from Denver. It feels good to connect with them. I am at ease.

Our second mushroom ceremony kicks off while the sun is still out, around three ¦.§. I ditch the pre-ceremony acupuncture and sound bath to form my own ritual: swimming in the cenote with some new friends, a social worker in his 50s and a scientist in his 30s. I take a shower and call my partner before skipping off to the ceremony with the scientist. We set up our yoga mats near a Wall Street guy with whom I've bonded over our shared New Jersey roots. I'm feeling more comfortable and less anxious this time. I go to the altar before the ceremony and jot

down my intention — simply "I love you." Then I wait, much more calmly than yesterday, to collect my mushroom tea. This round, I drink two and a half grams.

A nature walk is offered during this ceremony, and an hour or so into the experience I feel ready to explore. My wanderlust is partially brought on by the scientist, who seems to be having a negative reaction. The shaman sings over him and facilitators hold him down as he thrashes in distress. I'm worried, but I'm also sure he'll be okay.

With a small group and a facilitator, I stroll down rickety wooden planks through the jungle. We hold on to one another as we stop to examine trees and discuss their personalities like kids playing make-believe. The sun beams through the foliage the way it does just before dusk, hues of gold sparkling off the tropical leaves. At some point we run into another group of nature walkers, and together we venture to admire the cenote. We're told swimming is forbidden. We lament, because it's hot and humid.

The banker from New Jersey finds me.

"It's so good to see you!" he says enthusiastically.

He reports that he just came back from losing his ego and relates how terrifying it was.

"I feel like I'll never be depressed again," he exclaims. "It all feels so irrelevant now."

We head up a path of mosaic chakras to a wild and bright pavilion. Every inch is covered in hand-painted images of Buddhism. Lying on the cool stone ground, we watch with compassion, randomly chuckling, as ants skitter. The laughter echoes around me, fills my belly and makes me feel connected to these strangers in a way I've always struggled with. We're not that different, a voice inside me says. I don't have to be an outsider.

We return to the ceremony space to find the scientist coming out of hell. He's still scared, and I struggle to comfort him.

"If that's what it's like to die, I'm even more afraid," he tells me. I look at him deeply but don't know what to say. He's contradicting everything I've learned about the death of one's ego. Wasn't it supposed to be mystical?

We're politely asked to be quiet. We go back to our separate spots and lie down for the remainder of the ceremony. I feel great waves of self-acceptance and love—emotions I couldn't even fathom during the first ceremony. As the session ends, I'm more content and confident. At dinner, I consume more guava than is healthy to eat.

I wake up the next morning feeling elated, enlightened even. We're scheduled to take a break from tripping and go on an excursion outside the dense jungle. We're chauffeured to cenotes and beach clubs. I somehow feel comfortable and connected to everything around me.

The following day, I feel invincible ahead of our final ceremony. Opening up during the group session for the first time without tears, I talk to fellow participants without self-doubt. My mind clears all anxiety to make room for the present. I do yoga and meditate. The ceremony begins in the afternoon, and the familiar space is set up for us to sit in a circle, facing one another. I settle between two women I find admirable and ask to take four grams (the maximum offer is five). The facilitators have us stand and pass along the *agua de florida*, followed by a massive collective embrace. I usually dread the thought of touch, but the warmth is sweet. I set my intentions.

Teach me, I'm listening.

I'm determined to go inward — to resist resistance — so I secure my headphones queued with spiritual sounds and put my sunglasses on after finishing the tea. I focus on breathing with the hope of being taken on a vision quest, but all I see is the black inside of my eyelids. Just before longing and disappointment set in, the mushrooms transport me to a place where hardship and anxiety feel silly. I don't see Technicolor swirls or splashes of neon, just a pure white light. I transcend my identity as a neurotic writer (with crippling impostor syndrome) and laugh out loud at my foolish problems. The white light has always been here.

I usually dread the thought of touch, but the warmth is sweet.

When my mind wanders to my book, it's no longer burdened by stress. *Anything I don't know, I can learn. The only thing holding me back is me!* My book takes the shape of an epic tree that's so tall the top isn't visible to me. I'm in awe of it, as I would be of a giant ancient redwood. I see my life clearly — that I've created something beautiful. Its beauty should be cherished.

I open my eyes and survey my surroundings. I smile, recognizing all the people here with me doing their human thing, trying to comfort one another and themselves. I understand life's beauty, even if it also seems futile while I explore another plane of reality. Some people begin to huddle. I want to be close to them, but I'm not quite ready. First, I'm granted permission to sit alone with some trees behind the altar. I'm connected to the jungle. I thank the jungle out loud, crosslegged and staring into the darkness.

When I emerge from the trees, the others welcome me back. I snuggle under a blanket with the scientist and a model from New York; it's the closest I've felt to friends since I was in college almost a decade ago. We giggle and sigh. We invite others to join. I feel the light even after the visual fades.

This is why people do this. ■

TAYLER
Mercier

Model @TAYLERELAINE

Photography by NINO BATISTA @NINOBATISTA

This is a very exciting time for me. It's an honor and a privilege to work with Playboy. I'm a Texas girl at heart and it is my love for trav el that makes this interna tional shoot very special to me and close to my heart.

Describe yourself in three words.
Independent, sensual, romantic.

Were you excited to shoot for Playboy?
Yes. Very excited. It's an amazing opportunity.

Why did you choose to pursue a career in modeling?
I have always loved fashion and glamour and this was my way of expressing that interest.

What are some of your hobbies?
Traveling, spending time with my friends and family and my dogs, decorating, shopping, singing in the car, going to the gym.

Describe your perfect day off.
That's easy. Staying in bed all day in my pajamas.

Name three things on your bucket list.
For me this would be three places I have to visit. Italy, France and Greece

Do you feel more like a city person or a country person?
I am definitely a country girl at heart. I grew up in a small town so my heart will always be in the country but day to day I live a city girls' life.

What inspires you?
Original deep thought is very inspirational to me, sale-made success, and love for family and friends inspires me to be a better version of myself.

Tell us something surprising about you.
am a Huge animal lover. Dogs and ses have my heart.

cribe to us your perfect date.
candlelight and a full body age with soft music in the background.

Turn-ons
Someone who makes me laugh is my biggest turn on. Honesty is A must. Someone who challenges me intellectually.

Turn-offs
Arrogance - If someone goes out of their way to appear important that is not a good sign for me.

Chauvinists - Anyone not looking for an equal partner is a no go for me.

Liars - They must be honest with integrity.

THE
REPAIRMAN

According to **Anand Giridharadas**, money can't fix a broken democracy when the checks are cut by the elite. Inside the journalist's unexpected calling to fix a crumbling system, one speaking gig at a time

BY **MATTHEW SHAER**

The e-mail that led to the speaking gig that led to the book deal that led to the mid-career-ish reinvention arrived in Anand Giridharadas's in-box about four years ago, at the tail end of May. The Aspen Institute, a fantastically influential (and equally deep-pocketed) think tank, was planning its annual Action Forum — a place, as the institute's website boasted, for "actionoriented leaders to come together, pause, reflect, refresh and recommit to doing their part to build a better world." Several hundred people were expected to attend. Was Giridharadas interested in delivering the keynote address?

A former South Asia correspondent for *The New York Times* and the *International Herald Tribune,* Giridharadas had been involved with Aspen since 2011, when he was recruited as a fellow in the organization's Global Leadership Network. Many summers he flew to the foothills of the Elk Mountains to take part in days of symposia and conversations about the biggest of "big ideas." Poverty. Inequality. Migration. War. Peace. He collected rich and powerful friends and flew with them on private jets and dined with them at cliff-top mansions.

Initially, the whole experience was invigorating. But over time, a sense of skepticism set in. Unlike many of the other fellows, Giridharadas was not a professional philanthropist. He was certainly not an entrepreneur. ("Writing, if it is a business, isn't a very good one," he has said.) He was a journalist. His job was to question and poke holes in things. Although he admired the charity efforts of many Aspen attendees and donors — at both the corporate and individual levels — he was unnerved by what he increasingly viewed as high-level image laundering.

"It dawned on me that at Aspen we were sitting in the Koch Brothers Building, talking about making democracy better," he tells me. "We're talking about health, and we were doing it at events sponsored by Monsanto or Pepsi. Basically, the people who belonged to the institutions responsible for breaking the modern world were gathering each summer to talk about fixing the modern world."

The organizers of the Action Forum proposed that Giridharadas deliver an address based on his 2015 TED Talk, which was based on his second book, *The True American*, about a hate crime in Texas and the (failed) efforts of one of the surviving victims to prevent a convicted killer from being executed. Giridharadas replied: He'd be happy to give a speech. It just might not be the speech Aspen was expecting.

As Giridharadas saw it, he was presented with a golden opportunity: the chance to voice his frustration — and engage in some blunt truth-telling — in front of the very people who, in his mind, needed to hear it most.

"I remember the pope had just delivered encyclicals on climate change and on capitalism," he tells me, "and that gave me some extra courage, you know? I figured, That guy is risking assassination for saying the most unsayable things in our civilization as a leader of the most hierarchical big organization on earth. Surely I can give my trinket of a speech in Aspen."

In late July 2015, he took the stage at Aspen's Paepcke Auditorium. He wore a black dress shirt, the collar unfastened. His hair was combed into his usual impressive silver crest. "I was asked to speak to you today about forgiveness," he began. In at least one important sense, he joked, he would stay true to that topic. "After I have spoken, I will need your forgiveness."

He then launched into one of the most spectacular, outrageous addresses ever given at an Aspen gathering — a 30-minute diatribe that *New York Times* columnist David Brooks, an attendee, later described as "courageous and provocative."

"We plainly live in a new Gilded Age, in which extraordinary changes in our economies and technologies have created, as revolutionary times always do, extreme winners and extreme losers," Giridharadas said. The winners are doing great. But the losers "are watching their lives get worse day by day —sometimes, perhaps, so that ours can get better."

Yes, Aspen existed to address these inequities, to "build a better

ILLUSTRATION BY **CARMI GRAU**

world," as the language on the website professed. But only on specific terms. "I call it the Aspen Consensus," Giridharadas explained. "The Aspen Consensus, in a nutshell, is this: The winners of our age must be challenged to do more good. But never, ever tell them to do less harm. The Aspen Consensus holds that capitalism's rough edges must be sanded and its surplus fruit shared, but the underlying system must never be questioned."

He gave an example: a multimillion-dollar cash donation that allows "100 poor kids in the ghetto to learn how to code." On the one hand, what a noble gesture! On the other, was the donation really dissimilar from the papal indulgences once purchased by wealthy elites in medieval times?

"The indulgence," Giridharadas argued, "spares you from questions about the larger systems and structures you sustain that benefit you and punish others: weak banking regulations and labor laws; zoning rules that happen to keep the poor far from your neighborhood; porous safety nets; the enduring and unrepaired legacies of slavery and racial supremacy and caste systems."

Near the end of the address, over rustles in the crowd, Giridharadas laid out a thesis statement. "Let's just come out and say the thing you're never supposed to say in Aspen: that many of the winners of our age are also contributors to the problems they bravely seek to solve. And for the greater good to prevail on any number of issues, some people will have to lose." It did not escape the audience that the losers in that scenario were themselves. Or their closest friends. Or their family members. Or their colleagues and peers.

"That moment, in retrospect, was amazing," Giridharadas tells me, "because there was a standing ovation, there were loud cheers, but when you looked a little closer at some of the people in the crowd — their eyes! Man, their eyes. They looked like they wanted to kill me."

Like the pope, Giridharadas had said the unsayable, and he had said it loudly. As he exited the stage, a stranger grabbed his elbow and whispered two fierce words into his ear.

"*¡Que cojones!*" the woman said, grinning.

• • •

The most effective way to critique a system is to understand it, and oftentimes the best way to understand something is to have grown up within it, to speak its language fluently. Giridharadas is very much a product of privilege. He spent his teenage years in Chevy Chase, Maryland, one of the toniest suburbs of Washington, D.C. He went to Sidwell Friends School, the same Quaker academy attended by Chelsea Clinton and Sasha and Malia Obama. Many of his classmates came from families of those who "barnacle around official Washington: the PR people, the lobbyists, the lawyers," he says.

Still, Giridharadas, whose mother was an art teacher and whose father was a consultant at McKinsey and an executive at Capital One, was a limit-pusher — a "flamethrower" from the start. "I was a difficult kid," he admits. "My mom always jokes that she's relieved I'm now taking it out on the richest and most powerful people on earth, rather than her."

In his senior year at Sidwell, Giridharadas and a close friend, Tory Newmyer (now an economics reporter with *The Washington Post*), edited the school paper with "the idea that we were Woodward and Bernstein." When they put together a feature on a cheating scandal at the school, the Sidwell administration prevented the issue from being printed.

"We pulled the story because we had to, but we printed a front page that read 'For an explanation of why this front page is blank, turn to the editorial on page two,' " he recalls. "And then we wrote this editorial about censorship and free speech. Depending on your perspective, it was either extremely moving or extremely self-important and vomitous. Albert Camus was definitely quoted."

Sidwell has a strong track record of getting its students into the Ivies, but Giridharadas had middling grades. Harvard and Columbia turned him down, as did six other top schools. His lone acceptance letter came from the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, where he decided to major in history with an emphasis on politics. Throughout college, he attempted to break into journalism. As a teenager he'd had an internship at *The New York Times*, and during his later college years he approached then Washington, D.C. bureau chief Jill Abramson, one of his mentors, for advice.

Abramson, in his recollection, suggested he "get out into the world" to give himself an education in a particular culture or discipline and use the experience to inform his reporting. It was fantastically good advice, Giridharadas tells me. "Real writing," he says, "comes with some kind of collision with the

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **CHRIS SCHOONOVER**

"HE'S OUT SPOKEN IN A WAY THAT CAN HELP."

unfamiliar. And being a kind of careerist kid in Washington wasn't going to supply that magic."

He worked as a consultant for McKinsey in India, the country of his parents' birth, for a year, making about $14,000. ("I applied for an Indian position and got an Indian salary," he says.) Then a reporting job opened up in the India bureau of the *International Herald Tribune*, a paper owned by the New York Times Company. Against his expectations, he got it. Soon, he was crisscrossing India as a foreign correspondent, covering the booming economy and the ways it was transforming a society thousands of years old. That reporting became the basis of his first book, *India Calling: An Intimate Portrait of a Nation's Remaking*, published in 2011. A few years later, back in the U.S. and working from Brooklyn as a columnist for *The New York* Times, he published *The True American*. Both were admired by critics, if not exactly universally read.

Between finishing *India Calling* and starting *The True American*, Giridharadas had briefly attended a political science doctoral program at Harvard. With his background, he knew he could find a decent job in public policy, perhaps at a think tank or in the government. He might also have simply continued writing articles and books. Then he gave his March 2015 TED Talk tied to *The True American*, which became a turning point.

Viewed nearly 1.5 million times, the speech, which Giridharadas delivered after working with a professional acting coach supplied by TED, reached far more people than his writing usually did. It showed him what might be possible if he moved away from being a writer sequestered at a desk to the forefront of conversation and debate.

"I would have loved to live in an era in which the writing spoke for itself and you could just do the book and drop it and go back to your cave," he tells me. "But we don't live in that age. A book's a powerful tool, right? It's also a very limited one."

If the reception to the TED Talk had surprised him, it was nothing compared with the reaction to his keynote address at the Action Forum four months later.

"I've been lucky to have a few moments in my career, three or four maybe, where I feel like I've written something that everybody has read," he says. "This was one of those times."

Two days after the Aspen address, David Brooks devoted a column to its contents. "Anand's speech struck me as deeply patriotic in its passion and concern," he wrote. Soon, Giridharadas had uploaded the text to Medium, where it went viral. By that time, his previous agent had gone back to publishing and he had signed with Lynn Nesbit, a legendary force in the book business who represents such superstars as Robert Caro and Joan Didion.

"I remember Lynn said, 'This is your next book.' I was like, 'Maybe. I don't know.' And she was like, 'Trust me. I've been around a long time, and the world is telling you something. This is a resonant topic. This is your next book,' " he says.

Nesbit was right. Released by Knopf last year, *Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World* climbed bestseller lists, selling more copies than Giridharadas's two previous books combined. Essentially a reported version of his Aspen speech, *Winners Take All* uses encapsulated profiles to bolster its case. Bill Clinton is needled for trading an insistence that government is best equipped to level the societal playing field for an embrace of privately funded NGOs (shepherded by "world-traveling elites"). Meanwhile, Darren Walker, president of the Ford Foundation, is praised for his "taboo"-busting insistence on talking — publicly and in detail — about how the wealth of the current generation of philanthropists was made, whether through drugs (the Sacklers) or diabetes-inducing junk food.

"Are we ready to hand over our future to the elite, one supposedly world-changing initiative at a time? Are we ready to call participatory democracy a failure and to declare these other, private forms of change-making the new way forward?"

Giridharadas asks. "Or is meaningful democracy, in which we all potentially have a voice, worth fighting for?"

• • •

In the year and change since the release of *Winners Take All*, Giridharadas has been on the road nearly constantly, speaking at book fairs and political conferences but also in venues where one would expect him to be very much unwelcome. Think Google or Harvard Business School, that bastion of big capitalism and the launching point for many a wellcompensated career in consultancy. Videos of some of these engagements have become social media sensations. At Google, for example, Giridharadas suggested to his audience that it may be better for society if the internet giant were dismantled.

This spring, over lunch in Atlanta, where Giridharadas was slated to give a talk to a local philanthropic group, I wondered — given his track record — why companies like Google keep paying him to speak to their employees.

"I'll give you two theories," he says, laughing. "First theory is that everyone thinks *Winners Take All* is about everyone else but them." In other words, a bigwig at Google was comfortable having him around because said bigwig believed Giridharadas was indicting someone else altogether, someone far more explicitly wicked. "I would bet a lot of white people reading Ta-Nehisi Coates's book felt it was about all white people except themselves," Giridharadas says.

Second theory: A certain subset of powerful individuals has the self-awareness to withstand a challenge. They enjoy the debate. "They see the book as a tool to look at themselves," Giridharadas theorizes, "which is not to say they agree with me on everything. Trust me, they don't. They typically disagree on points like the government being any kind of solution to the kinds of problems I raised. But, to the credit of many of the people I'm indicting, a bunch of people chose to plead to the indictment and show up in court and have the proceedings."

Winners Take All "has caused great waves in big philanthropy — this notion that some of us need to take a good look in the mirror," the venture capitalist Freada Kapor Klein tells me.

"Achieving real change is something Mitch [her husband] and I have been trying to do for a while, and we had such a sense of vindication reading Anand's book," adds Kapor Klein, who founded the nonprofit STEM education initiative SMASH. "He's being truthful, being outspoken in a way that can really help."

When I reach out to Craig Newmark, founder of Craigslist and head of Craig Newmark Philanthropies, he says something similar. *Winners Take All*, Newmark tells me over e-mail, "reminds me of my values, like 'take less and give more,' and that a person should measure their wealth by how much they give away."

In recent weeks, Giridharadas, a newly minted editor at large at *Time* magazine and commentator for MSNBC and NBC News, has trained much of his attention on the upcoming presidential campaign, penning a lengthy profile of Bernie Sanders and decrying the chaotic, calamitous nature of the Trump presidency on *Morning Joe*. To Giridharadas, this kind of work is not a departure from what he set out to do in *Winners Take All* but a logical extension. The book, he tells me, "provides a good filter for viewing" the candidates seeking to oust Trump: the ones like Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, who understand that true equality will require the rich to give up more than they'd like, and the politicians like Joe Biden, who believe, as Giridharadas puts it, that "we can pull up the disadvantaged while also helping those at the top prosper even more."

The election of a figure from the former group, he argues, could result in real change. The alternative is not encouraging. "I think what would happen is a substantial percentage of what is disastrous about this country would indeed go away," he says. "There won't be gulags at the border, there won't be 'Muslim bans.' But all the deeper elements of the disease that made Trump possible will remain in place. Super-wealthy people will retain a monopoly on the fruits of the future, and yes, we will keep getting Trump-like figures."

It's getting late. Giridharadas has to change out of his T-shirt and jeans and into a suit to deliver his next reality check. By all reasonable standards, he should be exhausted. He flew from an event in England last night, and he's flying to New York in the morning. But the prospect of today's event seems to energize him. It brings him to life. He relishes the idea of getting back onstage and laying into the rich and powerful in front of a fresh group of listeners.

"There's this concept, especially in the business world, that criticism itself has been discredited, that it's not effective," he tells me before leaving. "But criticism, I think, can be incredibly productive. It stops us from listening to the wrong people. It helps us see people we thought were prophets as crooks. And once that's done, a whole lot becomes possible." ■

JOURNEY DOWN THE **RABBIT** HOLE.

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